

ANALYSIS

Birds of America (1971)

Mary McCarthy

(1912-1989)

"When the action lapses for Miss McCarthy, she starts making lists.... She begins to inventory the furniture, the books on the shelves, or the contents of the cupboards.... As Mailer has said on another occasion, 'Lists and categories are always the predictable refuge of the passionless, the timid, and the bowel-bound'."

John W. Aldridge
Saturday Review
(8 May 1971)

"[N]o creature more devoid of existential reality ever lived than this so-carefully-documented Peter Levi. Why a character 'lives' or does not is often mysterious; perhaps here it is fairest to say that Peter has no passions and no contradictions. He worries, he is rueful, he is ironic, he is quixotic, he is awkwardly idealistic, he is solemn--or he is meant, by the fictional gestures being made, to be all these things--but he has no insides."

Helen Vendler
The New York Times Book Review
(16 May 1971)

"Forsaking the group and the groves, Miss McCarthy has elected to take us into the kitchen and nursery of her imagination. In many ways it's a fascinating experience. (Can you imagine Julia Childs [TV cooking show chef] writing a political novel?)"

Anatole Broyard
The New York Times
(19 May 1971)

"*Birds of America* is the story of the coming of age of Peter Levi. A young liberal idealist, Peter is the son of Rosamund Brown of Ohio and her first husband, an anti-Fascist Italian Jew who emigrated to the United States during World War II. Peter is a patriot whose political milieu is shaped by the civil rights movement and the early stages of the war in Vietnam.

Peter has the strong moral sense that is characteristic of McCarthy's heroines, but he is shy and lacks their pleasure in being different and their desire to shock; and he measures the significance of his actions against the needs of mankind rather than the special requirements of a small society. An egalitarian, Peter attempts to order his life around Kantian ethics, holding as his touchstones two maxims in particular: 'The Other is always an End' and 'Behave as if thy maxim could be a universal law.'

The story is told entirely from Peter's point of view, but the use of his voice imposes no stringent limitations on McCarthy's style; he is educated, articulate, and observant. He uses slang and clichés with the license of the college student but not to the point of sacrificing literacy. The style is full of allusions appropriate to the college junior that he is: Peter tacks from Scylla to Charybdis, he sinks into the arms of Morpheus, he wonders whether a friend is doing a Sydney Carton. A serious young man, he can nonetheless see the ridiculous in himself as in others: He hears himself caw like the Raven; he knows that to a policeman he is a weedy member of the draft pool; he is Peter Levi, famed linguist, when his French fails him. Occasionally he falls into the attitude of the supercilious youth, but not for long. He is often argumentative--not contentious--because he loves to work things out logically. When he becomes irritated, he quickly repents, and compassion or his peaceable nature overrides the irritation.

Although the voice is convincing and the character consistent and likeable, the book is seriously flawed. It is about Peter's developing mind, but nonetheless his fresh discoveries of old ideas grow tedious, no matter how much we sympathize. Rosamund's menus and traditions are thematically important, but the lists and catalogues numb the mind. And we wonder whether we must know so much about Paris toilets in order to understand that Peter is disgusted and baffled by the copious droppings so unnaturally left exposed and reeking.

The novel is put together carefully. The action begins during the summer of 1964 and runs to Valentine's Day, 1965; it is set in Rocky Port, Maine, in Paris, and in Rome. The first and last scenes depend upon birds, an owl and a swan; but the birds of the title are of the human as well as the feathered sort, and both kinds provide a unifying motif. Comparison also ties the materials together. Thanksgiving Day in Paris recalls a Thanksgiving four years earlier in Rocky Port, and both are 'traditional,' or perhaps neither is. Past and present, two Christmas parties, two encounters with policemen, Paris and Rome, even Rome and Rocky Port are set against each other explicitly or implicitly, and the similarities and contrasts help develop the interrelated themes of nature, art, tradition, and morality. Peter's mentor, Kant, is present at the beginning through his maxims, at the end in Peter's hallucination. Yet in spite of all of these structural aids, the novel fails as a whole. Once Peter leaves Rocky Port, his story becomes a kind of pilgrim's progress, an intellectual biography in which people and events provide him chiefly with food for thought....

The Rocky Port section...is the best. Almost certainly fictionalizing her relationship with her own son, McCarthy puts a good deal of herself into Rosamund Brown, celebrated harpsichordist and mother of Peter. The sophisticated Peter was quite aware of his Oedipal phase as he lived it.... Rocky Port is now connected to New York by air service and by a new highway, facilities which render it easily accessible to people who identify themselves as escapees from the rat race. Though politically liberal, Peter is a traditionalist: 'Except in the field of civil rights, he was opposed to progress in any direction, including backward, which was the direction Rocky Port seemed to be heading in'....Peter misses a waterfall which has vanished in some way probably connected with highway construction.... The past in Rocky Port, even more the mythic past in Marietta, Ohio, are the Golden Age of Peter's childhood and his mother's in the *real* America....

Peter is a nature lover. In general McCarthy has rather ignored nature, and so have her characters. Even in portraying New Leeds, a seaside village, she does little with the natural setting. Rocky Port is something like New Leeds [in *A Charmed Life*], perhaps a decade later, but where New Leeds is comically exaggerated, Rocky Port is grimly exposed. In an outbreak of progress aggravated by bad taste, the Rocky Port species has spoiled its legacies of nature and tradition and reduced the little village to a characterless tourist town.... The police demand restoration of the historical notice to Rosamund's house; after a small fracas, Peter and his mother are locked up in the Rocky Port jail. Peter anticipated incarceration this summer before his parents vetoed his plan to go to Mississippi with the Students for Civil Rights.... The title of the first chapter, 'Winter Visitors,' is taken from *Walden*, and Peter naturally thinks of Thoreau as he settles into the 'cozy' New England jail.... Peter not only loves but feels responsible for Nature....

Peter...understands...that God is dead, an old piece of news and not so tragic; Peter has always lived without God. Nature's death is another matter, for he has always depended upon Nature, honoring her moral laws.... Peter loves the churches of Europe, but there is no hope of salvation through religion.... At fifteen he was romantic: 'His love for his mother coincided with his love of Nature and of the austere New England landscape.' He liked to imagine that he and his mother, discovering hidden features like the owl, were pioneers in the wilderness.... Peter is inspired to hope that 'as the old haunts of birds were transformed into sinister housing developments, linked by murderous highways, the city would become an aviary.... Birds are the most visible of Nature's wild creatures, but Peter's story begins and ends with captive birds, the melancholy owl and the violent swan, victims alike of the unfeathered kind....

Peter's peregrinations have shown him a world reeling with the old burdens of injustice, poverty, and violence; and none of the old remedies avail.... Science is more destructive than creative; along with vacuum cleaners and flush toilets... It has contributed the traffic of Paris and the bombs dropped on North Vietnam. Revolutions fought against injustice are part of the history which produced the systematic oppression of the American Negro [and which ultimately freed slaves, gave the Negro "affirmative action," and elected a black President of the United States--twice]. Social progress, when it does occur, is

destructive, cutting off the old consolations of nature and art and severing connections to the past.... Even a well-wrought socialist state no longer seems utopian....

Peter crosses the Atlantic by ship in order to take his motorbike with him, planning a leisurely overland trip to Paris before checking in at the Sorbonne.... Anti-Americanism troubles him partly because he feels it, too, in light of the 'assorted atrocities' committed in the United States by racists.... In the city of the French Revolution, Peter decides that equality is an idea which has never been tried; he would like to see it tested to find out whether it works.... The only friends Peter makes in Paris are Americans; the only congenial French people he meets are members of the bird-watching group he joins....

There is bad news in the morning papers; the United States has begun bombing North Vietnam. Peter and Silly [a friend] go to the zoo to distract themselves. Silly likes animals, but he enjoys playing games that to Peter seem cruel and dangerous. When he teases the swans by tossing peanuts between them until they grow quarrelsome, Peter offers, in a 'countermove,' to feed the black swan from his hand, and the bird attacks him. Blood poisoning lands Peter in the hospital, and a reaction to penicillin nearly kills him.... News about the bombing...brings Peter to despair. He seeks comfort in nature, but the desolation of the zoo only confirms his bereavement...

Peter and his philosophies are anachronistic; he recognized his quixotic nature in naming his motorbike for Quixote's nag, but he almost never rides Rosinante any more. A nearer literary relative than the Don is Candide, and perhaps Peter too will have to content himself by cultivating his garden.... Peter Levi, by name rooted in the priestly traditions of Christianity and Judaism, earthbound pilgrim and student of mankind, is qualified to make laws. He has been doing it all along. He was mistaken about Nature. Although the announcement of her death is made by Kant, the delirium is Peter's and the conclusion too is his. Mother Nature depends upon rather than provides man's regulatory instinct, an unsettling fact of the human condition....

Birds of America is a McCarthy anthology, harboring between its covers what might be called digressions on diverse subjects--Vietnam, the character of the French, art, among others--that interest her hero because they interest her. The purposes of the social critic sometimes override those of the novelist, and this must be acknowledged as a defect. Even conceding that the authorial digression is firmly established in the novel's history and that a book which is not altogether a novel can still be a good book, *Birds of America* is not a very good book. It is an excellent, funny, tender story--the Rocky Port adventure--followed by a series of scenes and essays containing a procession of characters who verge on the allegorical and a conclusion which, although bringing together the main threads of the book, is contrived."

Willene Schaefer Hardy
Mary McCarthy
(Frederick Ungar 1981) 122-29, 131-40

"The sixties gave birth to *Birds of America* (1971): old and new as the background in sensibility, culture, survival itself. Will the 'birds of America,' Audubon's America, survive the sanctuaries, neglect, ways in which 'rare birds' are misplaced in the contemporary imagination? Mary McCarthy sets her protagonist, a modern-day Candide, Peter Levi, in his Garden setting: Rocky Port in Massachusetts, where he and his mother, Rosamund, go to live. A performer on the clavichord and harpsichord, Rosamund has just broken up with her second husband, Peter's stepfather. As a result of her two marriages, Peter is not only a child of divorce, he is the child of differing cultures, his father an Italian Jew, his mother an early American, and his stepfather a refugee German scientist (also Jewish).

From this diversity of backgrounds, the meeting of Europe and America, Jew and Gentile, old and new ways, Peter must forge some modern ethic. He is essentially an innocent, not victimized, but a youth out of phase with his time. The time is the sixties, the war is the Vietnamese conflict, and the issues are momentous, although much of the novel is caught from a perspective in Paris, where Peter spends his college junior year. Observations from this distance, unfortunately, give everything not only a stilted quality but an unreal substance; and yet Peter must react to real matters. For him, the war, the bombing of

Hanoi, racial problems (he is very involved intellectually with the civil rights movement), one's relationship to historical values are not marginal but essential; integral to the good man and the good life.

Near the end of the novel, Peter and a friend visit the Paris zoo. In a deserted place, they see a black swan and decide to feed it. Peter, comfortable in his sense of wild things, assuming a rapport with the swan, tries to feed it a brioche and is, to his surprise, repeatedly struck by the beak, 'wounded.' The 'bird of France' has failed to recognize a 'bird of America': nature is, as it were, dead for Peter. That world of amazement and wonder with his mother back in Massachusetts is unregainable; every Garden is now tainted.

Peter has tried to live by the Kantian imperatives of duty, obligation, and moral intensity. On the final pages, when he lies in the hospital recovering from infection, Kant visits him, a considerable concession since the philosopher has never before left Königsberg. Peter's world, with the black swan's attack, the bombing of North Vietnam, and other events, has vanished, and Kant has reappeared to introduce him to a world where such things are commonplace. God is dead, Kant says, beating Nietzsche to the punch; then he says that 'Nature is dead, *mein Kind*,' which is the real meaning of 'God is dead.' Audubon's America no longer exists. And indeed, it may have existed only in Peter's fervent imagination: that of an innocent young man growing up with a mother who plays the clavichord and harpsichord in Rocky Port, Massachusetts.

There is poetry here which the large middle of the novel lacks. When McCarthy moves beyond the liberal 1950s and 1960s message implicit in Peter's comments, the novel comes alive; when Peter expresses his (her) views, the novel turns leaden. This is unfortunate, but it is an inevitable concomitant of McCarthy's failure to dramatize or structure Peter's remarks. As commentary, it is a *Partisan Review* letter from Paris, or a message to middle America, simply the commonplaces of a sensitive young man. Peter's attachment, however, to a Thoreauvian America, which is also a landscape of the imagination, is a different order of business."

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940/1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 172-73

"*Birds of America*, which Mary McCarthy had begun in 1964 but had put aside three times to write about Vietnam, was published in 1971. Although the war is present in the background, the primary theme of *Birds of America* is the pernicious way this century's culture has come to be dominated by technology.... "Winter Visitors," as the [first] chapter is titled, starts in Rocky Port in the summer of 1964. Peter Levi and his mother, the twice-divorced harpsichordist Rosamund Brown, return to the village they had lived in off-season four years earlier. The chapter is mainly Peter's memory of that happy fall of 1960. Peter loves Nature, which for him is the New England countryside with its interesting birds....

Obviously, Mary McCarthy drew from her own experience to express in the novel her regret over the disappearance of old-fashioned domesticity, and of much else in America, owing to the 'improvements' of technology. 'I must say, America is a shock,' she wrote Dwight Macdonald.... Besides the fact that McCarthy does not feel comfortable with any movement, she particularly dislikes the self-pity and shrillness she sees in the women's movement. 'As for Women's Lib, it bores me'.... Of course, there is no 'woman' problem in the circle she moves in, nor have any of her husbands been anything but generous in supporting her in her work. McCarthy, understandably, is happy in the feminine sphere--marriage, domesticity ('I myself don't object to the idea of serving'), pretty clothes, gardening, and above all, cooking. Having taught herself to cook, she has always taken great care with whatever she prepares.... In *Birds of America*, McCarthy has portrayed the way she acts in her own kitchen. *Birds of America* is her favorite among her own novels--'I like the hero. I like the ideas. Well, it's close to my heart'....

Peter Levi...is his mother's child in his sensitivity to the quality of life (his love for the natural and the beautiful), yet this, he finds, conflicts with his firmly entrenched belief in justice (his acceptance of democracy and egalitarianism). It is this opposition that provides the 'movement' of the novel and is embodied in Peter's encounter, on the boat train to Paris, with the American schoolteachers, whom he sees as kind and neighborly but ignorant and vulgar as well; in his struggle to keep the public toilet clear in his

Parisian lodgings, and in his dislike of the hordes of tourists who get in the way of his enjoyment of the Sistine Chapel. Peter's dilemma--he believes in equality, yet he is revolted by the tourists and even proposes that art-appreciation examinations be given for admission to the Sistine Chapel--illustrates the difference between his social idealism and the reality of society....

These ideas, McCarthy has said, are really what *Birds of America* is about. 'I have thought for years that once this egalitarian notion was discovered, say sometime in the eighteenth century, there's been a continual flight from it.... At the same time, any person with a child's fairmindedness cannot help thinking that equality is a good idea.' Peter Levi, the novel's hero, writes a long letter to his mother in which he expresses his theory of equality--that it is not such a good idea but that once it was thought of, there was no getting rid of it....

In *Birds of America*, when Peter spends his Christmas holiday in Rome contemplating the beauties of the Sistine Chapel and the seventeenth-century architect Borromini--and here, a perceptive critic has said, McCarthy 'hardly bothers in moments of high feeling to strain herself through the sensibilities of the 19-year-old lad'--he accidentally encounters his academic advisor from the Sorbonne. The meeting crystallizes Peter's objections to American capitalism and technology. Mr. Small, with his smug technocratic belief in this best of all possible worlds, is a spokesman for the wonders of contemporary American civilization. 'I can't think of a more challenging time to be alive for an American,' he says. 'All the options are open. No society in history before our own has given so-called mass man such opportunities for self-realization.' He scorns Peter's elitist rejection of technology. That people in an egalitarian world will defile the environment more than people in a hierarchical one strikes Mr. Small as elitist, yet it seems obvious that the sheer number of consumers of art, education, and travel, for example, will be far greater in an egalitarian society than in a hierarchical one. The uglification produced by technology and mass society is thereby increased exponentially. Peter's position, however, is made more difficult by his respect for a kindly Italian radical, Arturo Bonfante (based on Mario Levi), who reminds Peter that the picturesque simplicities he wants to preserve actually constrict people's lives.

At the end of the novel, Peter, who has gone to the zoo in despair over the bombing of North Vietnam, is wounded by an angry swan. Afterward, in the hospital (where technology in the form of penicillin, to which he is allergic, almost kills him), he has a dream of being visited by Kant, who announces that 'Nature is dead.' McCarthy believes that nature is dead or at least dying; in an interview at the time of the novel's publication, she explained the implications of this.... This view--that man needs to respect the natural world and listen to its laws because it is a foundation of ethics--comes, in large part, from McCarthy's reading of Shakespeare. She has remarked that the characters in Shakespeare's work who are drawn to nature, to the instinctive and the concrete, like the rustics, the clowns, and the fools, usually get the last word. The characters who are attracted to abstraction, on the other hand, are somehow bested, like the young men in *Love's Labors Lost*, or like Angelo, Lear, Coriolanus, and Shylock. Even those characters who do listen to the messages of the natural world and yet seem to be defeated in the end are usually ennobled. Ophelia, Desdemona, Emilia, Imogen, and Cordelia are examples. 'In all these young women there is a sense of being wronged,' McCarthy has written, 'of bewilderment, and at the same time a kind of acceptance, not of being wronged, but of the unjust nature of experience itself. They bow to life without yielding, and out of that they get their dignity.' Thus, to destroy nature is to impair man's moral faculty, which, according to McCarthy, is a regulatory instinct that keeps him in balance with the natural things of the world.

Partly, it is technology that is killing nature. Owing to market forces of worldwide dimensions, resources, including the land itself, are seen as commodities. As a result, people enjoy less rapport with nature. McCarthy concedes some technological blessings--the vacuum cleaner, for instance--but in general, she sees deterioration in every area of life. Taking air travel as an example of an 'absolutely ruinous' technological advance, she told an interviewer, 'Aside from getting us into wars, it distorts our relationship with Nature. And I think our perception of the world and our values stem absolutely from the possibility of some reasonably true perception of Nature--which is gradually disappearing, and will soon become impossible.

And partly, it is the idea of equality that is killing nature. The faster men attain their egalitarian dream, the more surely they debase the environment, and not only the environment: food is frozen and becomes

tasteless; entertainment becomes standardized through television; education is universalized by a 'watering-down' process. As Irvin Stock, McCarthy's most perceptive critic, has said, *Birds of America* shows that if 'men are to share equally in all life's goods--including those of the mind...these goods must be stripped of the particulars that limit their accessibility. They must be 'processed' into easily reproducible and portable approximations of the real thing.' Egalitarianism is a fine idea, but to live wholly by an idea, McCarthy has been saying since *The Oasis*, is to deny reality.

While *Birds of America* is a serious book, its tone is lighthearted and affectionate. While writing it, McCarthy often accompanied her Newport friend Nicholas King, who lived in Paris at the time, on bird walks, and the novel is full of real birds--from the dead Great Horned Owl in the first chapter to the ill-tempered swan whose bite puts Peter in the hospital in the last. In between are flocks of birds, real and metaphorical. Peter's mother is like the rose-breasted grosbeak, neighbors in Rocky Port are retired birds; the hard-drinking admiral has the hoarse voice of a seabird; the migratory species, the tourist-bird, is all over Europe. Peter goes bird watching in the Buttes-Chaumont Park with *les jeunes ornithologistes de France*. He also attends a Thanksgiving dinner hosted by a general attached to NATO, who is appalled because a guest, a vegetarian, refuses to eat turkey, 'the sacred fowl.' The general gives her some anyway.... Details like this abound in this comic novel, which, by identifying moral issues in minutiae, gives a sense of what is happening to contemporary culture."

Carol Gelderman
Mary McCarthy: A Life
(St. Martin's 1988) 303, 306-12

"*Birds of America* [is] the story of an American student coming of age in Europe... [It] opens in a New England shore town, Rocky Port, a transplant of Stonington, Connecticut...with touches of Portsmouth, Rhode Island. The American interlude allows McCarthy to ventilate a Maria Antoinettish disdain for the loss of the 'pastoral' conditions of the war years in the United States, when you had to do things yourself and rationing made you economize. The bulk of the novel's action, which is serendipitous, a series of encounters designed to test Peter's faith in equality and the Kantian ethic...takes place in Paris, with side trips to Rome...and to the Sistine Chapel where a dissertation on mass tourism takes place. The point of view is the student's, whose self-conscious theorizing rings true to his age but also permits the grown-up author, who is crouched inside a glass-walled ventriloquist's box, to indulge in some top-heavy theorizing of her own.... It is in Rome that Peter Levi's commitment to equality is tested and found wanting. Like his creator he is at bottom an aesthete, or a utopian, which is the same thing in the social realm, who concludes that 'the rules of democracy work better when there isn't too much cash around. The way it used to be in Athens.' Even if the Athenians (like Jefferson) did have slaves....

This novel, for all its faults--notably, its almost childish faith in the spirit world of ideas--reveals a side of McCarthy's 'actual person' that really was hidden from public view. The revelation is sharpest in the closing scene of the book when Kant himself appears at the foot of Peter Levi's bed... Hannah Arendt wanted to quarrel with the implied 'opposition of culture and nature. Culture is always cultivated nature--' she said, 'nature being tended and being taken care of by one of nature's products called man. If nature is dead culture will die too, together with all the artifacts of our civilization.' But maybe that is the point. The 'tending' has long since gone the way of the family farm, and it is only a matter of time before our faith in nature, McCarthy suggests, like our original belief in God, goes, too. In Peter Levi and his mother, nevertheless, McCarthy has invested her own irrepressible longing for beauty, wisdom, love, justice, and it is in culture--not society, not politics, not even nature, for none of her characters ever encounters nature outside a zoo or a park--that these ideals are kept alive....

It was not an auspicious moment for Mary McCarthy's fifth novel, which met with less than rave reviews.... The poor critical reception given...*Birds of America* might not have surprised McCarthy, had she been the critic and not the author.... The sneering reviews in *The New York Times*, *Time*, *Life*, and *The Saturday Review* were 'so weirdly personal,' leading her to wonder if 'the book reviewing profession is made up of personal enemies.' 'MARY MCCARTHY AGAIN HER OWN HEROINE--FROZEN GOODS A NEW VILLAIN,' ran a typical headline in *The New York Times*. [T]he amount of malice that is floating around here in literary circles is enormous,' Hannah [Arendt] reported from New York... McCarthy wasn't criticized for having produced a 'lady-book' or for stooping to conquer the middle classes, but for a lapse in

literary taste in drawing on a personal belief system for the mise-en-scene of a novel....The book was derided by critics, such as Helen Vendler, who disliked its 'bright topicality' and right-thinking, and found it 'ruthlessly circumscribed by [McCarthy's] own lived experience'.... [The book] was knocked off, McCarthy believed, by influential reviews like Helen Vendler's in *The New York Times Book Review*, which found 'no creature more devoid of existentialist reality...than this so-carefully documented Peter Levi.... [H]e has no insides,' Vendler declared; 'Mary McCarthy, for all her cold eye and fine prose, is an essayist, not a novelist'."

Carol Brightman

Writing Dangerously: Mary McCarthy and Her World
(Clarkson Potter 1992) 523, 524-530, 564

"To the end of her days Mary McCarthy professed to love *Birds of America* best of all her novels. Of course from time immemorial writers have been known to harbor a special fondness for the frailest of their offspring.... In *Birds of America*, the author's cherished beliefs and pet crotchets were everywhere visible. The reader first spots them in Rosamund, Peter's handsome harpsichord-playing mother, who is trying her best to provide her son with two brief but perfect idylls at a New England village bearing not a little resemblance to Stonington, Connecticut. Ready to speak out against the frozen food proliferating in the Rocky Port supermarket, to take a stand against the gaudy zinnias blazing in the village's deteriorating gardens, and to do battle over the new historic plaques gracing its oldest houses, Rosamund wants to give Peter the America of her youth and not some tarted-up version of it.

If Rosamund can be said to be Mary on the warpath, Peter is Mary plagued by doubts and second thoughts. As the reader watches a sorely beset Peter struggle to avoid self-pity while doing right by the well-intentioned and excruciatingly embarrassing Americans who cross his path, Peter may seem unduly fastidious, but for Peter's creator his dilemma was dismayingly real. Unfortunately, a handful of real moments do not add up to a satisfying book. And a carefully orchestrated publishing campaign cannot compensate for this. If reviewers were prepared to make use of Harcourt's press kit when summarizing the plot, they were rarely prepared to go so far as to embrace the novel's hero. Not only did reviewers fail to warm to poor Peter, they showed an unhappy tendency to fall back on Norman Mailer. Even the best reviews could hardly be called selling....

When she appeared on *Firing Line* and William F. Buckley accused her of hating her own country, it was clear she was headed for trouble.... Without question, the reception of *Birds of America* had taken its toll. It was not only the 'bitchiness' but the poor 'quality' of the reviewing that bothered her, she told an interviewer... She was hurt and disappointed and saw no reason to hide it.... 'Adolescent' was hardly the most damning adjective brought to bear on her latest book."

Frances Kiernan

Seeing Mary Plain: A Life of Mary McCarthy
(Norton 2000) 626-28

Michael Hollister (2020)