

ANALYSIS

The Oasis (1949)

Mary McCarthy

(1912-1989)

"It's the only one of my books that aimed at the moral reform of its targets. I really think I hoped to show them [the Realist faction] how they looked and sounded, with a view to their amendment."

Mary McCarthy

"English readers may have to contend with two difficulties: they may be unused to the alert political-minded rootless urban intelligentsia of New York from which her characters are drawn, though it is really very like our own, and they may be alarmed by what seems a certain coldness and inhumanity in the writer which is sometimes a by-product of brilliance."

Cyril Connolly
Introduction, *The Oasis* (1949)

"For a while [Philip Rahv] went into virtual seclusion. For a whole week he did not come to the office, and that was a rupture in his habits so violent that it could be produced only by something on the order of a catastrophe.... He saw only his wife and...William Phillips. For it was only the latter from whom he could draw consolation at a moment like this. William assured him that he was not discredited, that nobody around town took the caricature as accurate, and, finally, that Rahv wasn't really like that at all.... What was amazing was that there was no real break in his friendship with Miss McCarthy. For his part he could come to regard her act of writing as the play of a very brilliant child who does not quite know what she is doing. And for her part she probably had not thought her victim would be wounded, for it was all in such fun."

William Barrett (1949)
editor, *Partisan Review*
quoted by Carol Gelderman
Mary McCarthy (St. Martin's 1988) 146

"[Saul] Bellow and I...spent half the night talking about Mary McCarthy's alleged story. Perhaps there is something of an outraged masculine reaction involved (as I believe there was in much of the critical reaction to her first book) but we believe this thing is so vile, so perfect an example of everything that is nasty in New York and everything that is sterile in recent American writing, that we came to the conclusion that something should be done about it. The worst of it is not her stupid caricature of you but the utter cadaverous deadness of the whole thing: no life, no talent, no movement; the jokes are gruesomely flat, the story has no point, there is no literary (and hence--this is our great grief--no moral) justification for the whole thing, except a bewildered and rather pathological vengefulness. What has happened to this woman? Bellow and I are toying with the idea of writing a joint letter, or a dialogue, to point up some of the meanings of this foul piece--but now that a few days have gone by I question whether it is worth bothering about. People here who do not know the PR crowd find it utterly impossible to read this so-called story--so why waste our brightness on a document which should never have got beyond the file of a competent psychiatrist?"

Harold Kaplan
Letter to Philip Rahv (1949)
quoted by Gelderman, 147

"Have you read 'The Oasis' yet? Almost no one likes it around her except me. And I didn't like it the second time I read it anywhere near as much as when I hear Mary read it originally. Do you think it is vicious, malicious, and nasty?"

Dwight Macdonald

Letter to Nicola Chiaromonte (1949)
quoted by Gelderman, 147

"Mary's story has caused quite a stir over here (you must keep in mind that Paris has by now become to a great extent an American city, with the Saint-Germain section literally occupied...) the aforementioned stir being on the whole quite negative, I am sorry to say. I myself should have liked to be enthusiastic about the story, but alas I am unable to do so. Mary is certainly a brilliant girl, but why she should be so hopelessly literal, I can't understand."

Nicola Chiaromonte
Letter in reply to Macdonald (1949)
quoted by Gelderman, 148

"Mary's story: yes, too literal; also too much on the surface; yet I think the reaction against it is excessive; some very witty and penetrating remarks; most serious criticism I've heard is that the people caricatured cannot learn anything about themselves and their weaknesses from it; as one, I have to agree; you of course are the Holy Ghost, hovering over the scene but exempt, by virtue of your sacred character from either criticism or (alas) specific description."

Dwight Macdonald
Letter in reply to Chiaromonte (1949)
quoted by Gelderman, 148

"What is delightful about *The Oasis* is the infectious energy and enthusiasm of Miss McCarthy, who plunges gallantly into the thick of so many complicated ideas and problems with a rebarbative gusto. There is a violence in this writer which is both exhilarating and amusing.... Miss McCarthy's mind has what people are accustomed to calling a masculine width or range. She sees people in terms of moralities--both civic and personal. But it is even more her feeling for words and her talent for epigram which emerges at the end of the book as her particular gift."

Julia Strachey
New Statesman and Nation
(26 February 1949) 211-12

"I just read *The Oasis* and must tell you that it was pure delight. You have written a veritable little masterpiece. May I say without offense that it is not simply better than *The Company She Keeps*, but on an all together [*sic*] different level."

Hannah Arendt
Letter to Mary McCarthy
(10 March 1949)

"The author's failure--it is a distinguished failure--is due to the lack of a story. We simply do not care whether Utopia fails or succeeds."

Donald Barr
The New York Times
(14 August 1949)

"She has wit and gusto; she also has a bent for fastening upon some ridiculous or petty or pathetic aspect of a personality and she takes delight not only in exposing this defect but in making it central.... And since she has no qualms about using her best friends and closest associates as material for her fiction, it is small wonder that *The Oasis* has been one of the lesser scandals of 1949."

Margaret Marshall
The Nation
(17 September 1949)

"The most important thing in fiction is binding connection, that which makes the characters adhere to one another, as it were of their own affinity, through all the situations the novelist invents. This is love. It cannot be derived from the satirical connection.... Yet it is this which Miss McCarthy vainly tries to do in her last two novels (*The Oasis* and *The Groves of Academe*)....; she would have satire do the work of love."

Apparently she cannot prevent the substitution, because satire has become for her more than a genre; a virtual ontology which throws up a world of ridiculous objects, even when she herself belongs to that world and berates it only because she is unable to break her dependence on it."

Isaac Rosenfeld
New Republic
(3 March 1952) 21

"The condition that made *The Oasis* somewhat stillborn was that it was more biography than autobiography. In autobiography, self-exposure and self-justification are the same thing. It is this contradiction that gives the form its dramatic tension. To take a very extreme case, it is only natural that critics who find importance in the writings of the Marquis de Sade will feel that the man himself is not without certain claims on our sympathy and acceptance. In Mary McCarthy's case, the daring of self-assertion, the brashness of the correcting tendency (think of the titles *Cast a Cold Eye* and *On the Contrary*) fill us with a nervous admiration and even with the thrill of the exploit. Literature, in her practice, has the elation of an adventure--and of course that elation mitigates and makes aesthetically acceptable to our senses the strictness of her judgments."

Elizabeth Hardwick
"Mary McCarthy" (1961)
American Fictions
(Modern Library 1999) 210-11

"In 1949 she published a short satirical novel, *The Oasis*, about a group of politically minded intellectuals, some 'purist' and some 'realist,' the latter being embittered and disillusioned ex-Stalinists who secretly hope for the failure of the group's experiment which is to establish an independent community in an abandoned vacation resort and lead the simple rustic life in protest against a world crazily preparing for nuclear war. Comedy is immediately apparent in what they cannot leave behind: 'Agreeing, in principle, that the machine was to be distrusted, they had nevertheless voted to use in their experiment the bicycle, the carpet-sweeper, and the sewing-machine, any machine, in fact, to which a man contributed his own proportionate share of exertion and which tired him like the plough or the hoe. The bath, the flush toilet, all forms of plumbing they tolerated, but they opposed, at least for the time being, the installation of an electric power-plant, proposing to cook by wood and read in the evenings by oil.'

The experiment ultimately fails when some neighboring farmers trespass on the community's land to pick strawberries. What is to be done? Are the members justified in excluding other humans? Does it matter that they want their own strawberries for a picnic desert rather than to sustain life? In evicting the farmers, are they justified in using threats? Force? When one member finally drives them off by brandishing a gun, the community is split into rival sections.

The Oasis would seem more brilliant today if Miss McCarthy had not so far exceeded it in her later novels. It is significant in the direction in which it turned her satire. Ellen Glasgow, Edith Wharton, and Elizabeth Madox Roberts all struck a post-World War I America in the area that Sinclair Lewis hit, Babbitt, but they failed miserably where he succeeded. They had no real sense of what Babbitt was, and Lewis, of course, had more than a dash of him in his own make-up. Miss McCarthy has no difficulty in handling Babbitt; her heroines are even vagrantly drawn to him ('Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man'; 'The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt'); but she scorns to use her big ammunition against so slow a target. She reserves this for the intellectuals.

She taught English at Bard and at Sarah Lawrence; she knew her 'progressive' faculties. She saw that the illness of the modern world might be exposed most effectively by showing its ravaging presence in the very minority who believed themselves most immune. The ineffectiveness of liberal teachers and artists in the twentieth century suggested that their strength had been sapped by the dopes of the chain-store civilization at which they sneered. Where would they be without the ice cubes for the drinks that they had so constantly in hand?"

Lewis Auchincloss
Pioneers and Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Women Novelists
(U Minnesota 1961) 174-76

"The members of a utopian colony form a collective protagonist in *The Oasis* (1949). The action takes place in the late spring and early summer in the year of 1946 or 1947, but the events are not those of contemporary history. This particular oasis is being established as a refuge from a world that is moving quickly and definitely toward a third world war. Miss McCarthy has pointed out that 'a novel cannot be laid in the future, since the future, until it happens, is outside the order of nature; no prophecy or cautionary tale like *1984* is a novel.' Elsewhere she describes *The Oasis* as 'a conte, a conte philosophique'....

The Oasis is a form of 'let's pretend.' Taking X group of intellectuals from the known milieu of Y, Miss McCarthy places them in the imaginary setting of Z. Reasoning from her knowledge of how X comport themselves in Y, she conjectures how X will act in Z. To add interest, she posits that Z is a utopian colony that is similar in some respects to Brook Farm [and to Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*]. But the emphasis in this work is less on Z than on X. Miss McCarthy is trying to show the *effect* of this experiment in utopian living on the colonists and is not attempting to prescribe a panacea for the world's economic and political ills. Thus, *The Oasis* stands as a document to a political mood. '...Even Koestler was writing at that period about the possibility of founding oases--that's where I took the title.... It seemed possible still, utopian but possible, to change the world on a small scale....

With ironic suitability, Miss McCarthy has her urban, rootless people set up housekeeping on a mountaintop cut off from the metropolitan civilization that has sustained them and given them what tradition they possess. On this intellectual Olympus, the men attempt to act like gods, setting up their own rules and systems of value and meting out justice to one another in an arbitrarily principled fashion. The chief members of the colony are drawn from persons with whom Miss McCarthy has associated in real life. Brock Brower writes: 'In *The Oasis*, she might as well have used the real names, her Utopian colony was so patently inhabited by all her old soul mates from the Europe-America Groups (organized to help refugee intellectuals in the Forties) and so raucous with their chivvying, backbiting quarrels.'

Mary McCarthy, however, has denied the importance of autobiography in this work. Everything written since *The Company She Keeps*, she maintains, despite autobiographical elements, 'has been conceived as a fiction, even a thing like *The Oasis*, that's supposed to have all these real people in it. The whole story is a complete fiction. Nothing of the kind ever happened, after all, it happens in the future.' And pointing out the similarities between Dwight Macdonald and Macdougall Macdermott or between Will Taub and Philip Rahv gets nowhere. The characters do exist in her fiction as realizable people in their own right.

Although Miss McCarthy admits that she leaves herself open for readers to play the *roman a clef* game, she objects to this kind of detective work on the aesthetic grounds that it deflects attention from the fiction. 'What I really do is take real plums and put them in an imaginary cake. If you're interested in the cake you get rather annoyed with people saying what species the real plum was.' The 'imaginary cake,' then, is the colony itself. And it is the colony collectively that Mary McCarthy is satirizing. Intellectuals, she is saying, talk too much, and as a group they suffer from an occupational inability to put theory into practice.

In *The Oasis*, the thinking man's paradise comes equipped with a ready-built, but somewhat antiquated, abandoned summer hotel. Founded in accordance with the precepts of an Italian anarchist believed by the utopians to be hiding somewhere in Europe, the colony is supposed to set an example for 'a network of autonomous, cooperative communities with unlimited freedom for the individual....' What unites the colonists, most of whom are disenchanting liberals, is their lack of faith in any form of centralized bureaucracy. But from the beginning, the oasis is rife with quarrels and two distinct groups quickly emerge--the purists and the realists. Led by Macdougall Macdermott, the purists believe in the perfectibility of mankind; the realists, commanded by Will Taub, scoff at this assumption as naive. 'To them Utopia was justified on sheerly practical grounds, as a retreat from atomic warfare, a summer-vacation colony, a novelty in personal relations; and though in their hearts they too hoped for some millennial outcome of the experiment, for the reign of justice and happiness, they shrank from a definition of the colony which committed them to any positive belief.'

Between these two factions is 'an assortment of persons of diffuse and uncommitted good will' that includes, among others, two editors of a news weekly, a Latin teacher, a Protestant minister, an unemployed World War II veteran, an alcoholic woman illustrator, a middle-aged poet, and several New

York high school teachers. All share, however, a belief in utopia as 'the right to a human existence' and a conviction that conditions in the outside world are not conducive to such an existence.

Although none is gullible enough to believe that he can turn back the clock absolutely, each respects the Founder's idea of *limit*: 'Agreeing, in principle, that the machine was to be distrusted, they had nevertheless voted to use in their experiment the bicycle, the carpet-sweeper, and the sewing-machine, and machine, in fact, to which a man contributed his own proportionate share of exertion and which tired him like the plough or the hoe.' The absence of an electric power plant precipitates the first of the crises that advance the 'plot' of *The Oasis*.

Joe Lockman...causes the initial upset by accidentally flooding the wood stove with kerosene so that Katy Norell, assigned to cook the colonists' breakfast, burns her eyebrows and bangs. This gaucherie is the first action that sets Joe apart from the rest of the utopians. If a contrary positive principle does exist in this work, Joe Lockman, a self-made businessman and clearly not an intellectual, embodies that counter force. But Joe is not an attractive figure, for his zealous optimism and glad-handed gregariousness isolate him from the other members and make him seem simple by contrast. He is not a person temperamentally or intellectually able to save mankind.

The second crisis is a more important one, for it forces the somewhat ill-defined realist camp to act as a group and to take a firm stand against the purists. Early the first evening, Joe had made the mistake of 'scaring' Will Taub by coming up behind the realist leader with a gun and pretending to capture Taub. As a result of this affront to Taub and the incident involving the flooded stove, the realists find Joe too different from themselves and create the second juncture by calling a meeting to try to oust him from the colony. They fail because of the good humor of Macdermott, who makes their seriousness about such trivial offenses appear ridiculous. Joe is allowed to stay, and the issue is dropped. The resolution of this skirmish, by uniting both realists and purists in a spirit of greater tolerance, marks the 'beginning of the lyrical phase of the community.' On the practical side, however, the purists seem to have secured the advantage.

But, as in the short stories, the substance of *The Oasis* derives from the exact and penetrating analyses of the various colonists. The crises are merely intrusions that allow the colonists to react in their varying ways and foreshadow the ultimate failure of utopia by showing the fallaciousness of the purists' belief in perfectibility. These crises...quickly become intellectualized, so that the actual events, like the colonists themselves, act as representatives of various principles.

After the second crisis, the purists, although hopeful that the failure of the realists to codify their beliefs would bring about their downfall, are conscious that they are gradually abandoning their own principles in favor of simply getting along with Taub and his faction on a live-and-let-live basis. 'The discovery that one cannot convince an opponent and that it is hopeless to go on trying involves a confession of subjectivity that deprives the world of meaning: the colony, it seemed to the Norells and Leo Raphael, a poet, was losing its *raison d'etre*...' The realists, however, remain unregenerate and refuse to acknowledge past or present guilt; they treat the colony as an exceptional case that, by its estrangement from the rest of the world, can prove nothing to that world.

The sense that the oasis is separated from the real world and not relevant to it causes the third crisis. This comes about when a letter from their founder, reaffirming the world of small peripheral communities like their own, creates an awareness of their selfishness. Katy Norell, who speaks most often for Miss McCarthy, reflects that by neglecting to spread the gospel of their success and 'by becoming merely self-subsistent,' they had failed the founder. '...The others, however, saddened or thoughtful, felt no impulse to join her in a *Domine non sum dignus* ['Lord, I am not worthy'] which, for all its sincerity, had so clearly personal a reference; she was comparing herself, with all her shortcomings and weaknesses, to the great work the letter suggested to her.' But as more letters from Monteverdi arrive, informing them that what little news of the colony had filtered to Europe had created a favorable response in those countries not yet under Communist rule, the other colonists begin to share her despair.

Accordingly, at a general meeting held on the Fourth of July, Leo Raphael goads the colonists into action. His enthusiasm immediately inflames his audience with a desire to do something constructive

toward realizing their goals and breaking away from their isolation. Plans for sending a peace fleet to Europe to transport those Europeans who wish to join their movement are hazily advanced. The utopians volunteer to put out a pamphlet, to write to congressmen, to get articles in leading magazines, and to convince college presidents of the worth of their scheme. This enthusiasm precipitates the actual crisis. For, when faced with putting their ideas into action, the colonists back down, each finding reasons not to carry out his particular part of Operation Peace. It is then that the utopians realize that their escape from the outer world has truly been an estrangement. By renouncing the world, they have cut off former ties and rendered themselves unable to communicate with acquaintances and employers from their past life. A kind of sullen uneasiness settles on the colonists, broken by the irrepressible Joe who announces a fireworks display that allows the colonists to call for adjournment. The only semi-practical result of the meeting and operation Peace is the agreement to adopt one of the least ambitious of the various schemes--that Macdermott write a pamphlet outlining Leo's plan.

The fourth and final crisis follows the next day when a celebration picnic takes place. The colonists had agreed to spend the morning picking the small wild strawberries in the woods and then to meet in the meadow for a picnic and the awarding of a prize to the person with the fullest basket. But half-way through the morning, plans go awry when Will Taub and his wife discover in the meadow three strangers who are picking the wild strawberries 'where they grew in the greatest abundance, and with the sun-warmed flavor of wine.' Taub refuses to speak to the three berry pickers, and his wife's gentle attempts to get their attention fail. Disgruntled, the Taubs return to the main house where they tell Katy Norell and Eleanor Macdermott about the intruders. The men being absent, Katy goes out alone and tries to reason politely with the three invaders who, after listening to her explanation, continue with their picking. Returning to the main house, she finds that a quarrel is taking place. 'The young people...were defending Katy's action, while the older members were furiously condemning her for individualistic conduct. No principles were being invoked...' Angry at the hostility being directed toward his wife, Preston defends her by taking it upon himself to rout the unwanted trio. The young veteran follows him, bringing along Joe Lockman's gun. Unaware that the gun is loaded only with blanks, the intruders respond to the threat of violence and leave after a short interval.

The debate that follows this event makes the colonists realize that their 'victory' is really a defeat in that several of their cherished principles had been sacrificed. What this incident shows is that theory, when put to the test of reality, is inadequate. Katy, her husband, and the young veteran acted individualistically and intuitively by resorting to force in order to defend the utopians' rights of legal possession; but their instinctive responses betrayed them by being antithetic to the basic premise of the colony and, therefore, to the colonists' professed beliefs. The incident reveals irrefutably the fallacy of the purists' assumption that by changing their social environment they could change themselves. If they could not as individuals change, then the hope that they could look forward to some moral transformation as a group similarly was doomed. Each knows that a phase of the colony had ended: '...something had been lost that was perhaps an essential ingredient--a man can live without self-respect, but a group goes to pieces, demoralized by the ugliness it sees reflected in itself.'

Following the picnic lunch Katy and Taub talk. And it is after this discussion that Katy acknowledges that her own 'hunger for goodness was an appetency not of this world and not to be satisfied by actions, which would forever cheat its insistencies.' Even 'the desire to *embody* virtue appeared a shallow and vulgar craving, the refracted error of a naive and acquisitive culture which imagined that there was nothing--beauty, honor, title of nobility, charm, youth, happiness--which persistency could not secure.' She conjectures further that the utopia would fail completely unless the colonists put their energies into marketing a tangible, such as cheese or wine, instead of an intangible like a political ideology or a morality.

Lulled by the wine she has drunk and by her new awareness and sense of limitation, Katy lies back on the grass. A scene from the future intrudes on her consciousness. She sees in her vision the defection of one of the colonists, Jim Haines, the representative of the ordinary man, eluding the grasp of the theoretician to return to former ways. She envisions Joe Lockman--still a part of the colony, but soon to leave, to go onto new ventures--as having tarried briefly in this one and having gained nothing. While she is trying to count on her fingers those colonists who would remain, she falls asleep. With this dream *The Oasis* ends. Human nature remains a constant; utopia is, after all, only a vision....

The isolation of the utopia provides an atmosphere similar to that of an institution. Accordingly, the admittedly trivial incidents that comprise the plot of *The Oasis* get blown up many times greater than their actual weight and size. Although this distortion is comic, it is the reader's simultaneous awareness of the actual pettiness of the different crises that reveals the pretentiousness of the dream and shows how weak the man with principles really is. When put to the test, the colonists' moral aversion to violence and to the tenets of the capitalistic economy is of little use. These are negative assumptions that do not constitute a cohesive way of life. If the colonists had been of one mind, however, they could perhaps have put together a set of 'house rules' that would have prescribed what action to take against such an event as the unwanted strawberry pickers. But this is one of the dilemmas of *The Oasis*: the colonists are divided among themselves. Like the artist, the intellectual is an outsider and, consequently, somewhat anti-social in his behavior. *The Oasis* is a dramatization of this premise.

Although Mary McCarthy describes well the larger issues and principles at stake behind the seeming minutiae of the actual 'crises,' the portraits (or caricatures, as the case may be) of the colonists give this tale what life it possesses. As in the short stories, the singularity of the characters is also what makes them representatives of a general class. Within the general class of intellectuals, however, a few sub-genres can be detected, for example, Macdermott the pacifist, and Taub the cynic. Although these portraits are stylized, the artificiality of the stylization allows Mary McCarthy to dissect her characters and their varying attitudes wittily and precisely. Consequently, amid the silliness-seriousness of the squabbles, some of the characters stand out rather vividly, so that the reader becomes interested in them as people who have emotions and not merely as puppets capable only of mouthing certain ideas. For example, Katy Norell becomes convinced as a human being (and as a Mary McCarthy heroine) who voices a very human feeling when she acknowledges the impracticality of her ideals. Joe Lockman engenders some degree of sympathy because he is so plainly out of his element in the rarefied air of the mountaintop. And certainly Will Taub is complexly interesting as an antagonist.

Accordingly, the satire against intellectuals and against what happens when intellectuals band together becomes diluted. This weakening seems inevitable, however, for the satire in *The Oasis* is directed in part against those hopes that Mary McCarthy once shared. Thus the ideals are not so amiss as are the persons who hold them and the way they put them into practice. And a single individual is invariably more interesting than a collection of individuals held up for examination as a group. As the emphasis in this tale is put increasingly on the different colonists--with the analysis at times plunging below satire and beyond topicality--Miss McCarthy is content to rest her case on Katy Norell's reflections which, in essence, embrace the philosophical position of the realists and on the general observation that men are foolish to suppose that they can change their ways by changing their environment. In 'The Weeds,' Miss McCarthy wrote, '...for everything returns to itself and a marriage made out of loneliness and despair will be lonely and desperate.' The utopians can return only to themselves, and for some the limitations of the self are discouragingly severe."

Barbara McKenzie
Mary McCarthy
(Twayne 1966) 104-12

"The affair with [Philip] Rahv increased the young writer's fame among the left-wing literati in New York, and was to give her some useful material when she came to write her *conte* on left-wing politics and thinking, *The Oasis*. Rahv is the original of the character Will Taub; he is, as well, the hero of all the gossip about her at this time.... Rahv was reported to be furious at the author of *The Oasis*; it was rumored that he was threatening to sue her. Later she invited him to lunch early in the Fifties to discuss a new magazine she was thinking of starting. Her own attitude toward Rahv was never characterized by ill will (as so often happens with persons upon whom we knowingly inflict a hurt in some way). Indeed she seemed completely in the dark (the naivete showing again) as to any reason he might have for resentment at his recognizable portrait, and genuinely surprised at his reaction.... Another editor of *Partisan Review* at the time, Dwight Macdonald, was destined for fictional recognition in *The Oasis*, and there are other people whom she knew in these years, either on *Partisan Review* or in the course of her contacts with the wider literary world of New York, who make partial, undignified, satiric appearances in the short novel....

The Oasis is another group study or what might be called a continuity novel, a favorite form for Mary McCarthy. This may be because she found it convenient to 'study' characters so grouped together. Time, as in the chronicle novel for example, is not the catalyst; instead characters confined in a geographical area act and react upon each other.... It is almost plotless, and in its static form and in the strongly allegorical nature of the characters, it is indeed what its author said it was to the editor of *Horizon*, 'a landscape with figures, the figures being treated realistically, in a sort of Piero della Francesca manner, and the landscape being, on the one hand, an idyllic Nature, and on the other, a strange political climate of the real which they fantastically inhabit'....

If there was doubt that *The Company She Keeps* was a 'true' novel, there was even more about *The Oasis*. Cyril Connolly acknowledged that 'perhaps she lacked narrative power'; and to the *Paris Review* interviewer she later said bluntly: '*The Oasis* is not a novel... I never meant it to be. It's a *conte*...' It is more accurate to describe it by using her earlier image, a still life or tableau, or even a charade, a philosophical landscape of fantastical quality inhabited by allegorical figures. The title, she has said, comes from Arthur Koestler, who suggested the possibilities of establishing oases--small libertarian groups that would try 'to change the world on a small scale'....

The events of the book are these: a group of American intellectuals (all, that is, except the businessman Joe Lockman and his sybaritic wife, Eva) buy an abandoned summer hotel on a mountaintop in New England. Their aim is to retreat from atomic warfare (the time is the future but close enough to the present to be recognizable), to accomplish a 'secession from society' into a Utopia composed of civilized, educated persons. The Utopians are divided into two diverse ways of thought. The purists are led by Macdougall Macdermott, the editor of a libertarian magazine, 'ordinarily a serious-minded man, ready to oppose sectarianism whenever he observed it in others...puritanical, disputatious, hard-working, monogamous, a good father and a good friend.' Will Taub, who is Jewish and sensitive about it, leads the other faction, the realists, who 'had accepted as their historic mission the awakening of the left to the dangers of Red totalitarianism.' There are others, notably Susan Hapgood, 'a young novelist... Taub's Gentile wife, Cynthia ... Katy Norell, a charming, sensitive and vulnerable young woman, and her husband Preston... There is Eleanor Macdermott, who 'had been born into New York society... And there are others, of both parties...a Catholic 'Latinist teacher of boys, a Protestant clergyman, a trade union publicist, several high-school teachers, an alcoholic woman illustrator,' among others....

Three crises of rising intensity strike the Utopians. The first two are brought about by the 'simple-souled, common-sensical' Joe Lockman, the leather-goods entrepreneur whose election to Utopia is hotly debated among the prospective colonists until the two factions are shamed into accepting him by a blunt question from Eleanor Macdermott: 'What is Utopia but the right to an human existence?' Joe, the well-meaning, unthinking, diabetic bourgeois, shakes the colony again early in its establishment by putting an ancient stove out of commission and later frightening Taub with an unexpected prod of his shotgun. ('Practical jokes were anathema to him [Taub]; they belonged to an order of things which defied his powers of anticipation, like children, birds, cows, water, snakes, lightning, Gentiles, and automobiles.') Only the humor of the situation and the ridiculousness of the protestants break up the meeting to oust him....

The major, final crisis...comes from outside the group. Established, prosperous and economically secure, the community plans a strawberry picnic only to find that some interlopers, a woman, child and man...have driven into the patch and are picking their berries.... Preston and 'the young divine' in the colony take Joe's shotgun and frighten the 'brutal people' off. This miniscule 'threat' spells the end of the colony. 'Ultimately Utopia would fail, that was to be expected. But it might survive for many months or for years, if the production of a commodity more tangible than morality could be undertaken. Morality did not keep well.... 'All had counted on the virtues of others to rescue them from themselves.'

The book has two noticeable strengths: its style and its 'ideas.' It is studded with the right words, witty phrases, epithets and sentences that can be called 'fine.' Even her dependent clauses are barbed: 'With that instinctive tactlessness so common among educated people,' is a fair example. Her sentences tend to rise up and strike: 'The ease with which his arguments were prevailing awoke him to question their validity.' Occasionally, however, her unerring taste and accuracy fails as is inevitable with any writer who aims so many arrows at such diverse targets.... [She is sometimes] tasteless and unpalatable.... Sometimes...the

images are physically painful: 'and his heart, as he smoked, grew large...' There is an occasional overuse of heavy, Latinized words: a sense of restored continuity soothed his locative anxiety' is a good case in point. These minor complaints accompany one's discomfort with her rather oppressive use of foreign words and phrases.... This usage customarily marks an impatience with the resources of one's own language, the symptom, often, of youthful style. One feels the presence of a young writer seeking rather disparately for exact, suitable approaches to her meaning....

It is easy to be picayune about a writer's style, to point out the constant elements in it which tend to irritate the reader, and the weaknesses which ring in the ear. I find it far harder to indicate the very real strengths of Mary McCarthy's style. Her undergraduate writing indicates that at the outset she wrote with a strong inclination toward classical prose style. Even this early her sentences are balanced and precise. They tend to be epigrammatic and then to culminate in what might be called a periodic paragraph, the sentences increasing in strength until the last forceful phrase. As the style matured it never changed too much from this basic pattern. The sentences became longer, but still held together by antithesis, by balance, by a careful, structural sense. Her diction leans heavily on Latinate and romance words; she has a dislike of slang and never uses it unless it serves (as it does in *The Group*) a narrative purpose. Her writing is rarely ornamental, never poetic; it is notable that she never 'paints a landscape' or even is aware, seemingly, of the world of nature in which human beings exist. This contributes to the 'allegorical' tone of her fiction. Her prose, deceptively dry at times, then judiciously (and often surprisingly) punctuated with a witty sentence, alternately abstract (in the classical manner) and then graphically concrete, is coherent, consciously structured to give her ideas and observations the greatest force. She is fond of the unsupportable generalization ('like all European woman, she...') if it serves her satiric purpose, even fonder of the supportable, accurate detail.

If her paragraphs are periodic in form, the rhythm rising toward the final period, so too are her chapters. Often she will bring a whole book to a climax in the last paragraph, whipping it all to a fine, final classical fury with a Latin quotation, or she will close by bringing up the big guns of a final paradox (as in *The Groves of Academe* and *A Charmed Life*), aware, in the twist of a sentence, of the irony of human existence and the vagaries of human thought.

As for its ideas, *The Oasis* might be described as a declaration of lack of faith, a set of articles of disbelief. If Mary McCarthy had once put her trust in the Left, in radical parties of that persuasion, she here seems to separate herself from that trust in the Left, in radical parties of that persuasion, she here seems to separate herself from that trust; if belief in a unified and dogmatic system of thought had ever held her she here publicly abandons it; and if she ever thought that the American liberal was closer to an effective morality than the American reactionary or moderate she here throws doubts upon *that* assumption. Her own liberal stance does not save her from a profound distrust of liberals and intellectuals.... She says the book grew out of her fury at her experience with Europe-America Groups. She regards them coolly, with detachment, and her ear for their tonal vacillations, their distress with themselves, their self-justifying inner dishonesty is unerring....

These 'facts' of character are part of the strength of the book. She herself does not hesitate to say that 'they were all, more or less, straight portraits, not even composites.' Particularly angry critics, like Margaret Marshall, her former collaborator on *The Nation*, pinned their criticisms on these identifications, as if being able to 'spot' the originals of a literary character automatically made the fictional portraits valueless. Mary McCarthy's portraits, said Miss Marshall, are clever and malicious, she 'has no qualms about using her best friends and closes associates as material for her fiction,' and the result is that *The Oasis* 'is not serious...either as a work of art or as the satiric comment it purports to be on our contemporary intellectual and political life.' Donald Barr in *The Times* said that readers outside 'her inner circle' would 'get little from *The Oasis* except a vague sense of defamatory brilliance and a few fine scenes.' Gorham Munson put the same point more gently by saying that she was 'too close to her material, too much identified with it herself'....

Mary McCarthy knew these people well; on one level, indeed, it is a *roman a clef*, but it goes further. The book is a series of flashes of instant recognition into their motives, their vacillations, their character. Just as there is no plot, no important events that proceed one from another, so there is no development of

character or even any real change in the characters. They are satiric portraits, brilliantly placed like precious stones into a setting. Their failures, or what might be termed their sins, are intellectual, their virtues are the negative ones, their attractions for the reader are their patent weaknesses. Our attitude becomes the author's as, in an unusual abdication of her own faith in liberalism, we react with her. We feel skepticism, some amusement, slight dismay, and acute embarrassment, all cerebral reactions to what is, after all, a book of ideas. We suspend ourselves and our private views of the liberal, intellectual person long enough to accept hers, like the congregation of a popular minister who willingly follow his political, economic and aesthetic views because they are so completely 'with' him on theological matters.

In the case of *The Oasis*, one of these newly accepted attitudes is the author's developing attitude toward men, sex and love. In *The Company She Keeps* we saw her begin to put down her amusement at sex, the Fall become a pratfall, the sense of the ridiculous that finally overcomes Meg's horror the morning after in Mr. Breen's compartment. Although sex as such plays no part in what happens in *The Oasis*, and there are no seductions and no one 'takes' anyone even once, there are hints that Mary McCarthy still has found no reason to take sex or marriage seriously.... She is equally divided, it would seem, between the stylist she is and the 'wrecker,' the deflater of thought in fictional form. So tough-minded and distrustful is she of the ideas she allows to roam free through this book that one begins to doubt that this is a novel at all. It is, rather, a display case for the death of certain illusions, among them that liberalism in political theory or action is more reliable than any other philosophy, or that liberals because of their men-of-good-will phrases and high-sounding, resounding talk, are nobler than other men.

Joe Lockman comes out of this book rather well, almost the way Mr. Breen did out of 'The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt.' Both are blunt, direct, unpretentious, unintellectual, and likable in contrast to the slippery, pretentious, weak and foolish intellectuals; Meg as antagonist to Breen fits this description of the intellectuals at many points. In this Utopia it is discovered that 'a man can live without self-respect, but a group shatters, dispersed by the ugliness it sees reflected in itself.' The virtues that survive this pitiless discovery are sparse, individual, and occasional: honesty with one's self, a thin sprinkling of ineffectual yet well-meaning human kindness, a kind of surface *politesse*, and an appetite for the good 'not of this world, and not to be satisfied by actions which would forever cheat its insistencies.'

The image-lover that Mary McCarthy is here chooses her similes from an already recognized source, her childhood religious training. At least ten times in the short space of less than two hundred pages her references are strongly religious and liturgical.... The Catholic girlhood may not have sustained her spirituality, but it served her literary needs exceedingly well.... The larger irony is, of course, the defeat of a group of intellectuals, not by the brutish, almost animal-like intruders, but by the invocation in themselves, at the smallest threat to their property and their appetites, of the most primitive emotions. The beast within takes over at the suggestion of the beast from without, and idealism is dealt a blow.... The 'good' sensitive intellectuals are made to realize that their own reactions are horrifying, far worse than the behavior of the brutes, whose characteristics, like the coarse, brutal Nazi in Meg's dream in 'Ghostly Father, I Confess,' represent a threat to the weakened intellectual only because they throw the intellectual back upon himself and make him aware of his own failures.... It is often not fiction that Mary McCarthy is writing but rather an allegorical essay, and the invaders are symbols, not characters....

To most contemporaries, the satirist is the least popular of writers because his target is human pretensions, and we hate to watch these being exposed, we flinch from the sight.... Man lives on illusions about himself, his hopes, his dreams, his resolutions. The satirist who is concerned to destroy these illusions is in trouble with his own time.... People in satire are not developed in the way that they are in the social or psychological novel, but are extremes, grotesques, forever the same and in this sense, symbolic.... Satire is customarily pessimistic, the pain the satirist feels at what he sees is the *tone*. The method of relieving the pain is mockery. By his tone and his choice of objects for his satire the satirist passes moral judgment on his fellowmen and their behavior. Thus he tends himself to become proud.... His indignation, his dedication to truth, and his pessimism become themselves targets for his incensed readers or his critics....

Joseph Henry Jackson has reproached [McCarthy] with touching 'only the reader's mind...whereas the genuinely first rate satiric novel must also touch the reader's emotions'.... Gorham Munson in *The Saturday*

Review said that it was the question of distance that disqualified her: she was too much identified with her material herself. Satire is critical, he goes on; Mary McCarthy is more amused than critical, and she takes 'a self-sufficient delight in her characters and their dilemmas.' Henry Rago felt that her characters were so flat that they 'were limited to the kind of caricature you find in the broadest and least subtle form of satire.' And Donald Barr attacks on two fronts: 'There are two types of satire, two ways of developing such an idea as this. One assails our common conceit and folly, analyzing the general of man and his institutions. The other assails particular figures, relying on the reader having or wanting the key to 'the originals.' Great satire is the first.' This division relegates *The Oasis* to a lesser level without any evidence but that favorite device of the daily journalist, a self-made definition under which the work being discussed does not do well at all.

Margaret Marshall used the same self-conceived definition approach: 'Satire, good satire, breathes hatred of evil and stupidity--but its mainspring is love of the good and the intelligent. It always subsumes a passionate belief in moral values and is therefore affirmation.' *The Oasis* fails on all these counts because it 'expresses no emotion stronger than condescension or scorn.' Louise Bogan is even harsher, demanding 'that part of the maturing equipment of the satirist should be warmth,' although, after Juvenal and Swift, this seems a curiously limiting requirement.... Others, like Denham Sutcliffe, flunk her for being *too close* to the classic definition... He concludes that in *The Oasis* the touch is not that deft but the razor is too keen, 'so keen that it's hard to know what she is satirizing'....

Her satire in *The Oasis* is classic, her ideal is human society based upon reason, intelligence and selflessness, her oasis is a fantasy and her object of attack the pretentiousness and dishonesty (even to themselves and usually to others) of the most intellectual, the selfishness of the most endowed with worldly goods. That she offers little hope for her ideal is in the accepted tradition of the form. It is critically irrelevant to dismiss this classic stance by launching personal attacks upon her use of known persons as models for characters or to accuse her of failing to be 'affirmative' or lacking 'passionate moral belief.' These may indeed be true of her (although to me it is fairly apparent that her destruction of tissues of pretension is fired by fury at moral failures) but in any sense they are no real detriment to successful satire. Her posture in this book is pessimistic, critical and mocking.... She might be echoing Juvenal...

The reception of *The Oasis* was critically excellent, personally trying. Philip Rahv's anger and the rumor that he was thinking of suing Mary McCarthy have already been noted. Another libel suit was instituted by a stranger whose name happened to be identical to one in the book. Editors of *Partisan Review* were unanimously angry. Some persons who were not recognizable in the book but had been involved in the Europe-America Groups were somewhat miffed to be left out of the book. Sidney Hook asked Mary McCarthy: 'Why didn't you write about somebody really *big*? The trouble with the book is that these people are all so little.'

Doris Grumbach
The Company She Kept
(Coward-McCann 1967) 76-77, 139, 141-47

"Instead of plot we have slight episodes explored for their large meanings and characters revealed less by what they do than in long satirical descriptions. But it cannot eliminate the sense that the tale's developments, which ought after all to arise by an inner necessity, are sometimes arbitrarily asserted, as if to get things moving. And yet the reminder of an elegant eighteenth-century prose from does point to qualities that will keep the tale, in spite of its imperfections, interesting for a long time. The satirical descriptions do not merely imitate but genuinely duplicate the qualities of eighteenth-century prose masters --the psychological insight, the general wisdom, the witty, epigrammatic, gracefully balanced sentences.

The Oasis is the story of a group of New York intellectuals--based apparently on well-known friends of the author, but to the rest of us quite recognizable as contemporary types--who, shortly after World War II, form a colony called Utopia in the Taconic Mountains of New York state.... The 'purists' hope the colony will illustrate 'certain notions of justice, freedom, and sociability' derived from their Founder, a saintly Italian anarchist lost in 'a darkened city of Europe.' This group is led by Macdougall Macdermott, a man who rightly senses that he does not naturally belong to 'that world of the spirit' which he yearns to enter...

The 'realists,' on the other hand, have come only for a holiday from the pressures of real life. They look upon 'conspicuous goodness' like the Founder's as a 'form of simple-mindedness on a par with vegetarianism, and would have refused admission to Heaven on the ground that it was full of greenhorns and cranks.' Moreover, they find absurd the assumption of 'human freedom' which underlies all that the purists believe, for they are inheritors of Marxism 'scientific socialism,' and though they had discarded the dialectic and repudiated the Russian Revolution, 'the right of a human being to think that he could resist history, environment, class structure, psychic conditioning was something they denied him with all the ferocity of their own pent-up natures and disappointed hopes.' And since 'ideological supremacy' has become 'essential to their existence,' they look forward with pleasure to the colony's failure. They do, however, wish it to fail convincingly, of its own foolishness, and this seduces them into unusually good behavior. Soon Will Taub, their leader, finds that he participates 'in the forms of equity with increasing confidence, and though of course he did not take any of it *seriously*, his heavy and rather lowering nature performed the unaccustomed libertarian movements with a feeling of red sprightliness and wondering self-admiration, as if he had been learning to dance.'

In Will Taub we have the first full-fledged example of the enemy in Miss McCarthy's world, the Other to all that she values. He is one who is at home only in the realm of ideas, who is flat-footed in his behavior with children, women--in all non-intellectual relations--who feels pain at the very word 'Jew' because 'his Jewishness [was] a thing about himself which he was powerless to alter and which seemed to reduce him therefore to a curious dependency on the given.' And this rejection of the 'given,' the real, on behalf of a world of ideas where he can reign supreme involves too a rejection of moral responsibility. It is for the realists a felt oddity in Utopia that 'here they were answerable for their deeds to someone and not simply to an historical process.' And Taub is even capable, like the later Henry Mulcahy, of beginning to believe his own lie (that an embarrassingly cowardly reaction of his is due to former police persecution) in order to maintain his cherished supremacy.

These two characters, and Joe Lockman, the go-getting businessman who comes to Utopia determined to get more spiritual profit out of it than anyone else, are the tale's most vivid portraits. But it is a fourth, Katy Norell, to whom its chief events tend to happen and out of whose responses its meanings emerge. Katy, a teacher of Greek, suffers from 'a strong will and a weak character,' an awkward compulsion to tell the truth even when it aggravates her problems, and a readiness to feel guilty when things go wrong. Though it was her 'instinctive opinion...that the past could be altered and actions, like words, 'taken back,' her husband's disgust with her, on one occasion when it seems serious, gives her a frightening glimpse of life 'as a black chain of consequence, in which nothing was lost, forgotten, redeemed, in which the past was permanent and the present slipping away from her.' This character, weak but scrupulous, who wishes life were easy but can't shut out the perception that it is hard, is, of course, a sister of Margaret Sargent as well as of the later Martha Sinnott, though, unlike the others, she pays for representing her author's inner life by being one of the less vivid characters in her book. But it is out of her inner contradictions that the book's closing insights come.

These insights are initiated by the last of several challenges to the colony's 'sociability'--the stealing of their strawberries by some rough interlopers, whom Katy herself, frightened when her pleading is answered with threatening gestures, demands be ejected by force. Taub taunts her with her contradictions, her yielding to 'human nature,' and at this, lulled or liberated by the dinner wine, she begins to understand. They did wrong, she thinks, to cling to the strawberries without needing them--it was only the idea of the strawberries they really cared about. They had let 'mental images' possess them as the idea of sex dominates the mind in pornography. But the mind should stick to its own objects, 'love, formal beauty, virtue': they should not have tried to make real things dance to the mind's tune. And this is only a small example of their fundamental error. As the tale draws to an end, she realizes that Utopia is going to fail because of their wish to 'embody virtue.' If they had been content to manufacture, not virtue, but furniture, it might have survived.

It is a rueful, if not tragic, conclusion. To replace the stubborn complexity of people and society with ideas is the mistake of both parties in Utopia. The cynics who insist that our behavior is determined by history and the 'idealists' who believe so easily that man can be what he wishes to be are shown to be equally removed from the life we actually live. And yet those like Katy Norell, who see through this error,

who feel and suffer life up close, are better off, if at all, only because it is better to understand. For their superiority consists mainly in desiring a virtue they know they can never attain."

Irvin Stock
Mary McCarthy
(U Minnesota 1968) 21-24

"*The Oasis*...is according to its author a *conte philosophique* with a satiric purpose.... Once again, McCarthy is very critical of liberals. When the book came out in 1949, it angered many who recognized themselves not only as types but as individuals impaled on the rapier of McCarthy's wit. Nonetheless, the little book continues to be highly regarded.

Utopia is the oasis, an abandoned resort hotel purchased by a group of about fifty people, most of them intellectuals, as the setting for a social experiment. They regard the community as a retreat from the threat of atomic warfare and a chance at a simpler life than the one they have left behind. The outcome is foreshadowed in the first paragraphs, where, describing the businessman Joe Lockman, who, 'honoring [Utopia's] principles of equality and fraternity...was nevertheless determined to get more out of it than anybody else,' McCarthy observes that 'habits die hard.'

Even before the 'great migration' to the property, factions develop. The realists, chief of whom is Will Taub, justify the experiment on 'sheerly practical grounds, as a retreat from atomic warfare, a summer-vacation colony, a novelty in personal relations.' If 'in their hearts' they hope, as the purists do, for 'some millennial outcome...the reign of justice and happiness,' they have no conviction that isolation, nearness to nature, a simple life, and the good example of some of the Utopians will bring about moral reform. Nevertheless, they are as determined as the purists are to give the experiment every opportunity to succeed.

And so they set about cultivating their garden, quite literally. Taub soon feels called to more important work, however, and leaves his lime bag in the hands of a young student: 'He had spent so many years in executive positions that it seemed quite fitting that someone younger than himself, and less powerful in a worldly sense, should take over whatever was onerous in the work of the day'.... The important work that calls Taub is a meeting to reconsider the doubtful inclusion of the businessman in the experiment; Joe Lockman has already offended twice, once by carelessly leaving oil in the primitive kitchen stove so that it exploded and singed Katy's eyebrows when she came to light it, and again by playing a practical joke on Taub with the gun that Joe has brought along. But Utopia survives the test of Joe; he is not expelled, and the Utopians turn their attention to their plan to bring peace-loving Europeans to the United States to establish a 'United States of Europe in Exile.' They feel that solving the world's problems must start *somewhere*, but as tasks are assigned, individually they find excuses for it not to start with them.

On their property they are delighted to discover a field of wild strawberries, and they plan a picnic around the ripening of the berries. The dissolution of Utopia is prefigured in the events of the chosen day. A family appearing to be 'of the very poorest farmer class' is seen picking the berries. Katy applies tact: 'We don't mind your picking, but would you leave some of the strawberries for us?' The fact is that she *does* mind their picking, and she finds it inconceivable that they refuse to leave once she has politely pointed out that they are poaching. The encounter ends with the pickers making threatening gestures and shouting 'obscene imprecations' as Katy retreats. She hastens home for help, but there her action, rather than that of the pickers, becomes the center of crisis. Some Utopians feel that she has done well, but others condemn her 'individualistic conduct.' As 'all the latent hostilities of the past six weeks' come to the surface, Katy's husband and a veteran take Joe's gun and go to frighten the intruders away. When Joe appears on the scene, he is outraged that the people are being driven off, then even more outraged to realize that his *property*--the gun--has been taken without his permission.

Utopia has run afoul of events for which it has no rules. But even if a rule is made to cover situations like this, 'something else will come along, something we can't predict,' and 'the organism, unprepared, will react to it according to its own rules, the ones it was born with.' When her property rights are challenged, Katy reverts to social prejudice, thinking frantically that 'those brutal people...were incapable of appreciating the strawberries.' Macdermott sees Lockman's hospitable reaction as 'refreshing' until he recognizes that Lockman's horror is grounded in a 'convention of the commercial world, where the

handshake and the banner of welcome were axioms of intercourse'--the episode is bad PR. But however motivated, Joe's response still looks better than the unfriendly responses of the others. Macdermott does not know how he himself would have handled the pickers. 'Morals to him were a chess problem in which the opening gambit elicited a set response, and the errors of modern society he laid simply to failure to use the unconventional opening advocated in his magazine's pages.'

Katy muses, afterward, that the Utopians' problem is not to confuse 'material triumphs with the triumph of...ideals.' To Taub's objection that historically 'man is shaped by his economy and his environment,' she retorts, 'Then let us get out of history.' In history, Utopia will fail and fail again because people run true to form. Pretensions of moral superiority and rhetorical intellectualizing are no defense against the old Adam, who first tries saying 'The strawberries are *mine*' and then proves it with a gun. Given a new Eden, we will always come to grief over the fruit."

Willene Schaefer Hardy
Mary McCarthy
(Frederick Ungar 1981) 165-68

"The title for McCarthy's new book, she told an interviewer, came from Arthur Koestler, who at the time was writing about the possibility of establishing small libertarian groups, or oases, that would try to change the world on a small scale. This idea was of course exactly what Nicola Chiaromonte, Dwight Macdonald, and Mary McCarthy had been discussing... 'For years I used to have a dream,' she told another interviewer, 'of living in some sort of anarchist utopia which would have maximum freedom which implies of course maximum self-discipline. Anarchist utopia means that there would be no established central criteria.' McCarthy created an imaginary version of such a community in *The Oasis*. But the failure of Europe-America Groups had undermined her confidence that such an endeavor could succeed.

The Oasis is a fable about a group of New York intellectuals--clearly based on her own circle--and one businessman, who together form a utopian colony in an antiquated, abandoned hotel in the Taconic Mountains, in the vicinity of Pawlet, Vermont (where the Broadwaters had summered in 1947). Founded in accordance with the precepts of an Italian anarchist, Monteverdi (obviously Nicola Chiaromonte), who never appears in the book, the colony is supposed to set an example for 'a network of autonomous, cooperative communities with unlimited freedom for the individual.' Moreover, the group hopes to sponsor an 'Operation Peace,' which would bring over Europeans with a desire to join their libertarian venture. But dissension splits the group in two from the beginning.

The purists want to put into practice Monteverdi's notions of justice and freedom. Their leader, whose conception of politics is too demanding, too pure, to be workable, is Macdougall Macdermott, the fictional version of Dwight Macdonald. Mac Macdermott 'ten years before...had made the leap into faith and sacrificed \$20,000 a year and a secure career as a paid journalist,' just [like] Macdonald and his wife Nancy... The realists come to Utopia to shuck off the pressures of everyday life, and on the outside chance that the purists will succeed. The do not believe, as the purists do, that anyone 'could resist history, environment, class structure, psychic conditioning' and find unlimited freedom. Will Taub, who is based on Philip Rahv, is their leader....

They hotly debate whether to admit businessman Joe Lockman, a go-getting nonintellectual, to their group. Joe, determined to get more spiritual profit out of the oasis than anyone else, is finally accepted, since 'ostracism...would indeed have been an ugly beginning for a community devoted to brotherhood.... The members question whether they are justified in excluding anyone and whether it matter that they want their own strawberries for a picnic dessert rather than to sustain life. They argue about whether to use threats or force to evict the intruders. They are, in short, talkers and not doers. In the end, two Utopians chase the trespassers away with Joe Lockman's gun. The colonists, however, do not appreciate the irony in their having protected their property while simultaneously subscribing to Proudhon's maxim, 'Property is theft.' Only one of their company understands the meaning of their failure. Katy Norell, something of a stand-in for the author--a person with 'a strong will and weak character' and an awkward compulsion to tell the truth--realizes that to try to embody virtue on the communal level is absurd until it is accomplished on the individual level.... All Utopian colonies have failed, McCarthy implies, but society outside is a greater failure....

Although Mary McCarthy has said that she is not conscious of much satire in her books, she remarked once that 'the only one that aimed at the moral reform of its targets, if that is the word, was *The Oasis*. I really think I hoped to show them (the realist faction: Macdougall Macdermott is incorrigible) how they looked and sounded exposed on a mountaintop.' Unable to refrain from intellectual wrangling, both the realist and purist factions sound ridiculous.

The reviews of *The Oasis* were, on the whole, unenthusiastic. Brendan Gill in *The New Yorker* did characterize the novel as 'an absolutely unmitigated triumph of wit and writing skill.' But more typical reviewers' reactions included 'mild entertainment,' 'small rewards for reading so many words,' 'a philosophical disquisition with fictional trimmings.' ['The Utopians'] sins are intellectual,' wrote Henry Rago in *Commonweal*, 'and so their torture is in kind; they simply have Mary McCarthy watching them.'

Ironically, most critics complained that she was too gentle. Gorham Munson, for example, wrote in the *Saturday Review* that 'Miss McCarthy is more amused than critical because she was too close to her material, too much identified with it herself.' Even Brendan Gill, in his otherwise positive review, wrote that it was to bad she ended the tale on a note 'of cheerful assent to the malevolent conditions of life.' T. J. Ross in *The New Republic* contended that 'the "satire" contains one of the friendliest and most sympathetic portrays of intellectual people that I know of; in fact, as a story *The Oasis* is not a success because of the imbalance between the affectionate and winning presentation of the characters and the presentation of the satirized situation in which they're involved.' Paul Goodman, no exception to the Mary-is-too-kind grievance, blamed the satire's 'toothlessness' on 'Mrs. Broadwater's habitual sunny friendliness,' and then proceeded to parody the book in a review in *Furioso*, Carleton College's literary magazine. Edmund Wilson, who habitually championed his former wife's work, complained in a letter, which the magazine published, that a book by Mary McCarthy deserved 'more serious consideration.'

Philip Rahv was flabbergasted by the reviews. How, he wondered, did the critics detect cheerfulness, sunniness, gentleness, amusement, friendliness, sympathy, and affection in *The Oasis* when he perceived nothing but malice? He was furious about his portrayal, and threatened to sue McCarthy (so, too, did a stranger with the same name as the businessman). Rahv went to a lawyer, but Dwight Macdonald persuaded him not to bring suit. 'You realize, Phil, in order to win this lawsuit, you have to prove that you are Will Taub,' Macdonald said. 'Are you prepared to make that kind of jackass out of yourself?' Rahv got the point, abruptly halting all talk of legal action. He was, however, 'wounded to the quick.' 'I thought it was cruel to Philip' Elizabeth Hardwick says, 'because he was very vulnerable.' Rahv's fellow *Partisan Review* editor, William Barrett, recorded how the shock of reading *The Oasis* temporarily healed a rift between Rahv and his colleague William Phillips, a rift that had begun when Phillips complained to Rahv that he 'had talked too freely against the other [editors] behind their backs'....

In one way, William Barrett was right that 'it was all such fun.' The Broadwaters had a wonderful time during the creation of *The Oasis*. ('That book,' says Elizabeth Hardwick, 'came about through the influence of Bowden. He thought all those people were a scream.') Walter Goldwater, the treasurer of Europe-America Groups and a fleeting character in *The Oasis* ('I'm the man who looked like a nailfile,' he cheerfully recalled), found the book amusing and accurate. 'I don't think Mary was vicious, she just described'.... Macdonald...although he was the most comical character in the fable, reacted to it quite mildly....commenting [in his letter to Chiaromonte] that it was 'true to some extent, but just as bitterly inhuman as Mary's story, really, and even more exaggerated; maybe I'm a centrist; I know the intensity of the feuds and polemics now running about repels and frightens me.'

Carol Gelderman
Mary McCarthy: A Life
(St. Martin's 1988) 142-48

"In *The Oasis*, a group of leftist, libertarian refugees from mainstream America move into an abandoned turn-of-the-century resort in the Pennsylvania foothills, ostensibly to practice what they preach: 'certain notions of justice, freedom, and sociability.' When the colonists find themselves using force to eject a local party of strawberry pickers who are trespassing on their new property, the experiment runs a cropper. McCarthy assembles the usual bunch: an editor, teacher, critic, Protestant minister, actor, trade unionist, girl student, magazine illustrator, novelist, middle-aged poet, and the colony's maverick, a diabetic Jewish

businessman from Belmont, Massachusetts. In one guise or another, they are characters the reader meets in nearly all her fiction.

At the novel's end, a few stick to the ribs: the businessman, Joe Lockman, 'a sad Jewish comedian,' gray around the gills, 'he lacked audience-sense to an almost fatal degree.' In middle age, Lockman has taken up painting for purposes of relaxation, 'only to find in art (he has gone straight to the moderns) something bigger and better than business, a gigantic step-up transformer for the communication of personal electricity which excited his salesman's vision with promises of a vast "development".' With such characterizations, McCarthy threw a mirror up to the culture around her--to the rise of 'action painting,' in this instance, and the 'actionist' criticism of Harold Rosenberg, who worked by day as a copywriter and also had his businessman's side. (Rosenberg, whose *The Tradition of the New McCarthy* reviewed favorably in 1959, left his mark on popular culture when he invented Smokey the Bear for the Advertising Council.)

Other characters such as Macdougall Macdermott (Dwight Macdonald), the editor of a radical magazine, 'tall, red-headed, gregarious, susceptible to a liver complaint, puritanical, disputatious, hard-working, monogamous, a good father and a good friend,' are rooted so vividly in the soil of the real that their appearance in *The Oasis* brought an otherwise-lumpish short novel to life. At least for a few thousand followers of *Partisan Review* and *politics* was this true, and then, by the ripple effect accorded coterie literature, to others for whom the work of the principals was hardly known. 'Do you know I once knew more about Mary McCarthy and Philip Rahv than I knew about *myself*?' remarked a disgruntled observer of the scene. The machinery that transforms literary gossip into literature and then back into literary gossip was, in the case of the New York intellectuals, firmly set in place when the English magazine *Horizon*, where *The Oasis* first appeared, awarded the book first prize as the best short novel of 1949.

When Macdougall Macdermott pounces on his fellow colonists the night Joe Lockman's name is proposed to the 'Utopian council,' he sounds exactly like Dwight: 'My God, aren't we going to have any standards?... Don't you believe in *anything*? This fellow is a Yahoo.' Moving on, the reader learns something about Macdermott/Macdonald's conjugal life, as well as his relations with his children; nothing scandalous, and Macdonald, unlike Philip Rahv, never protested his portrait in *The Oasis*. ('Was Dwight intimidated by Mary?' Nancy Macdonald was asked in 1985. 'Dwight was not intimidated by anybody,' she replied.) But when McCarthy observes that all his life Mac suffered 'from a vague sense that he was somehow crass, that he did not belong by natural endowment to that world of the spirit which his intellect told him was the highest habitation of man,' she took the portrait a step closer to her subject's inner life. 'Of all the enrolled Utopians,' she comments astutely, 'he was closest to Joe by temperament.' Here was a man who would have scoffed at a poem (just as Dwight scoffed at Eliot and Pound in the 1930s), if the idea of poetry had not been explained to him. 'Nevertheless, ten years before, he had made the leap into faith and sacrificed \$20,000 a year and a secure career as a paid journalist for the intangible values that eluded his empirical grasp,' as had Macdonald (who made 'James Joyce' his underground name when he joined the Socialist Workers party in 1939) when he left *Fortune* in 1937 for *Partisan Review*--and, in a different sense, as Joe Lockman does when he sets out from Belmont for Utopia.

But it is the more ambiguous portrait of Philip Rahv as Will Taub that is interesting for the political analysis it contains of the withering away of a dissenting culture after the war.... Rahv, who was usually impervious to the criticism of others, was only 'really crushed' by public opinion once: 'when he read Mary McCarthy's cruel caricature in...*The Oasis*.' Behind this exposure was the authority of the written word, which Rahv worshiped. Moreover, the book showed him as ridiculous rather than evil--as when Taub is unmanned during a stroll in the woods by a gun-toting Joe Lockman, who has presented himself in jest to the terrified leader of the 'realist' party as 'the sheriff.' Finally, the damage was done by a woman who had once been his lover, and for whom, according to Delmore Schwartz, he had never ceased to nurse a special attachment.

Looked at today, the scenes from *The Oasis* that show Rahv in a state of emotional undress don't seem that significant. One is inclined to agree with McCarthy, who insisted she meant no harm by the portrait, that the book on the whole is 'really quite tender to Rahv.' Nonsense, says Nancy Macdonald, 'she was insensitive to his feelings.' Rahv, in any event, did initiate a lawsuit, alleging 132 violations of his rights, but *The Oasis's* publisher, Random House, resisted it, and he withdrew the charge. Dwight Macdonald

himself may have talked him out of it when he reminded Rahv that in order to win, he would have to prove he was Will Taub. 'Are you prepared to make that kind of jackass out of yourself?' he wondered....

In *The Oasis*, she delights in Taub's 'materialist imagination [which] was continually at play, building on straws of report vast structures of conjecture and speculation.... What really interested him was information,' she notes, 'and the magical properties it contained for the armchair subjugation of experience.' The same might be said of the author's imagination. But when McCarthy observes of Taub that 'he was a politician even with thought, keeping an eye on the various developments in literature and the arts in the manner of a chief of state who has some subordinate read aloud to him the editorials in the opposition newspaper,' she depicts Philip Rahv in a nutshell....

This 'ideological supremacy' is the linchpin in McCarthy's analysis of what made the *PR* intellectuals appear ridiculous in the postwar period.... 'The dictators of a diminishing circle of literary and political thinkers,' McCarthy writes of the intellectuals she knows so well, 'they maintained the habit of authority by a subservience to events,' clinging to their ability to demonstrate how a significant occurrence or deed could not possibly have happened other than the way it did in this materialist predilection--a 'fixed belief in the potency of history to settle questions of value,' McCarthy calls it--they flew against one of her own treasured beliefs: the 'concept of transcendence,' which she would describe later (in 'Artists in Uniform') as 'the concept that man is more than his circumstances, more even than himself.'

Taub and his friends had been inactive politically for a long time and their materialism had hardened into a 'railing cynicism,' McCarthy notes; 'yet they still retained from their Leninist days, along with the conception of history as arbiter, a notion of themselves as a revolutionary *elite* whose correctness in political theory allowed them the wildest latitude in personal practice.' It was this 'latitude' McCarthy found objectionable, not because she felt it herself--most likely because Bowden Broadwater and Eve Gassler did, the 'hard-working subordinates' in the tale. At the office, 'arriving late on Mondays and leaving for the weekend on Thursdays,' Taub and friends 'were short and harsh with the typists, rude to the telephone girls....' As Eve Stwertka, who worked at *Partisan Review* after Bard, recalls: "there were these four men [Rahv, Phillips, Schwartz, and Barrett] coming into the office once a week and dictating to me; and the rest of us were women--there was one other man, but he quit after Bowden did--so we ended up running the day-to-day operations of the magazine.'

The Oasis has often been cited for the meanness of its portraits of the author's fellow intellectuals, and no one is more outspoken in marking the charge that Mary McCarthy had a 'wholly destructive critical mind' than Alfred Kazin. 'She seemed to regard her intelligence as essentially impersonal,' he states in a memoir; she was always 'surprised that her victim, as he lay torn and bleeding, did not applaud her perspicacity.' In conversation, however, Kazin makes a criticism of the *Partisan Review* circle that is not unlike McCarthy's in *The Oasis*, only it includes Mary McCarthy, along with the contemporary 'neo-Right' (Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, Daniel Bell). The political arrogance of the latter, he thinks, is rooted in the same unholy alliance of modernism in literature and politics that inspired anti-Stalinist intellectuals in the 1940s....

What bothers Kazin about this group is what bothers him about the neo-Right--'crooks,' he calls the latter, who 'still think they're giving advice to the lower orders.' They're all 'superior avant-garde types.... The whole key to the *Partisan Review* was that they were...Modernists about revolution,' he states. 'They thought of themselves the way Lenin thought of himself. Along comes Stalin who introduces real politics into the game, starts murdering people, and of course, they're intellectuals, they never murdered anybody, and they get out. But they cannot escape the fact that there were two dreams involved,' he adds: 'one was the dream of revolution, which is a great dream...and the other was [the dream of] the avant-garde.' The great figure for both was Trotsky--'incredibly arrogant, incredibly sure of himself, and finally...knocked to death in Mexico by forces he always claimed he was superior to.' For Kazin, 'Mary was in that sense a perfect example, like Philip Rahv, like Hook, of someone who had that intellectual assurance. They were avant-gardists'."

Carol Brightman
Writing Dangerously: Mary McCarthy and Her World
(Clarkson Potter 1992) 312-18

"*The Oasis* was coming on the heels of a spate of well-regarded but little read political satires. Starting with the publication of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* in 1945, short political satires had been enjoying something of a literary vogue. To bring to bear a distorting mirror on some portion of society with the aim of reforming it was one way to grapple with a world that was running hopelessly amok...

Gracing the inside flap of the dust jacket was a blurb lifted from Cyril Connolly's letter, announcing that Mary McCarthy observed 'like the devil' and recorded 'like the recording Angel.' Faced with the author's reputation and Connolly's hyperbole, few reviewers had the courage to disparage the novel's writing, but they were not quite so reluctant to question the success of her satire. On the whole, the novel fared better with men than with women. In the *New York Post*, Dawn Powell...said that readers would find in its pages 'the mothball odor of old prize essays.' In *The Nation*, McCarthy's old collaborator Margaret Marshall did not refrain from letting readers know that while the author had based her characters on real people, their portraits were no better than 'caricatures'.... Once again, [McCarthy] had rushed to have the last word in print and ended by writing herself out of a relationship without ever quite intending to do so. Once again she had won a skirmish but somehow lost the war."

Among the would-be Utopians are several former Communists, a family of anarchists, a news editor, a poet, a minister, a girl student, a college teacher, a veteran, a printer, a novelist, a businessman, and a good-looking short story writer named Katy Norrell, possessed of dark hair and a slender young husband and a plethora of moral scruples.... The Realists have come looking for a new summer colony safe from atomic fall out. Disaffected Marxists, the Realists are now successful businessmen who retain 'a notion of themselves as a revolutionary *elite*'--an elite deserving of 'the widest latitude in personal practice' both at home and at the office. They know the Purists are hoping to reform them, and look forward to thwarting them. Above all, they look forward to seeing the colony fail....

The plot of *The Oasis* reaches its climax so swiftly it can leave readers wondering if they have missed something. Having been led to expect a conflict between the Realists and the Purists, they must make do with a *deus ex machina* in the form of a family of trespassing local bumpkins and then accept as final and irrevocable pretty dark-haired Katy Norrell's realization that the colony is doomed to failure and all her good intentions are no less doomed. Having waded through pages of character analysis and the skimpiest of plots, readers are rewarded with some fairly dispiriting insights....

Without a whisper of sex, Mary McCarthy had once again managed a critical success that also stirred up a bit of a scandal. The novel was touted as a *roman philosophique*. In a generous introduction, [Cyril] Connolly placed its author firmly in the ranks of such writers as William Congreve and Benjamin Constant, Elizabeth Bowen and Ivy Compton-Burnett. Then, seemingly intent on taking away with one hand what he had bestowed with the other, he noted 'she perhaps lacks narrative power' and '[t]he writing may at times seem a little strained.' Indeed, that was the least of it....

Decades later the author was prepared to acknowledge that there might have been some justice to Rahv's grievance: ...'[He] had a legitimate cause, I suppose, to sue me.... There were many points of resemblance; in fact I wanted him to recognize himself. I thought, See how you look. But I do think that's often a motive for a certain kind of satire: See how you look to others. It's intended--obviously, in this case it was intended--for the reform of that person.... Satire, I suspect, is usually written by powerless people; it is an act of revenge'."

Frances Kiernan
Seeing Mary Plain: A Life of Mary McCarthy
(Norton 2000) 298-300, 302, 304, 312-314

"After she married [Bowden] Broadwater, McCarthy began writing a novel, one that took as its subject the leftist-intellectual scene in New York, called *The Oasis*. It has a somewhat fantastical premise, sending a group of Socialist-leaning intellectuals off to rural Pennsylvania to build a utopia. Naturally, the effort fails, in no small part because of the pretensions of the people who live in the colony. It is hard to see what exactly motivated McCarthy to write *The Oasis*, a project she dashed off quickly, in a matter of months. There was a fashion for political satire at the time, set off by Orwell's *Animal Farm*; perhaps that might have inspired her. In real life, McCarthy had just been through a disastrous attempt to organize, among

American intellectual leftists, support for foreign writers. The whole thing had disintegrated in infighting. Perhaps *The Oasis* was meant as revenge.

'The whole story is a complete fiction,' McCarthy argued years later, nonetheless. She meant the plot. The people in it, she admitted, were drawn from life. 'I do try at least to be as exact as possible about the essence of a person, to find the key that works the person both in real life and in the fiction.' Philip Rahv's essence was given form in a character named Will Taub. Taub is a leader of the group, but his bluster masks serious insecurities--over, among other things, his Jewishness. He is supported by a silent wife with whom he is 'brusque and out-of-sorts...when she tried to think about social problems.' (Rahv had by then married one of McCarthy's Vassar classmates, a woman named Nathalie Swan, who somewhat answered to that description.)

Abstractly, the novel is funny. Socially, it was self-sabotage. McCarthy poked virtually direct fun at many of her friends. A round of backbiting about the novel's apparent nastiness was set off among all the people who, through the years, had been connected to the *Partisan Review*. 'The woman is a thug,' Diana Trilling was said to complain. It is hard to understate the deep sense of betrayal many of those parodied felt. Rahv, in particular, was wounded. He held a meeting to discuss what to do, at which point many tried to talk Rahv off his high horse. But Rahv had his mind made up: he threatened to sue. He had a lawyer send a letter to its American publisher claiming the book 'constitutes a gross infringement of his right to privacy, with such material that is utterly false, objectionable, and defamatory.' Eventually he backed off, in part because his friends reminded him he'd have to prove he was recognizable as the silly character in McCarthy's novel in order to make the defamation claim. The prospect was unappetizing.

Worse, the book was not much of a hit. It referred to a world that was relatively insular, and certainly not one the general newspaper readership could possibly be expected to recognize. 'Miss McCarthy's very accuracy is a drawback in writing a book for her particular set of concentric audiences,' complained the *New York Times* reviewer: 'The inner circle is too small. The editor of a little magazine is not the Lord Treasurer of England. And readers outside that circle can get little from *The Oasis* except a vague sense of defamatory brilliance and a few fine scenes.'

One person who read the book, knew the inner circle quite well, and still loved it was Hannah Arendt. A little while before, she and McCarthy had made up on a subway platform. 'We think so much alike,' Arendt apparently told her, five years after the fight at the party. And in a letter, she praised the book that everyone else had hated so much: 'I must tell you, it was pure delight. You have written a veritable little masterpiece. May I say without offense that it is not simply better than *The Company She Keeps*, but on an all together different level.' One thing the book did, then, was bring the 'characteristically perverse' McCarthy closer to the conscious pariah, Arendt."

Michelle Dean
Sharp: The Women Who Made an Art of Having an Opinion
(Grove 2018) 116-18

Michael Hollister (2020)