

ANALYSIS: HOW I GREW

by
Mary McCarthy

Autobiography

"A good deal of education consists of un-learning--the breaking of bad habits as with a tennis serve,' wrote Mary McCarthy of the Vassar education that she sometimes felt consisted of little more than smart talk, labels, and pseudo-cleverness (How I Grew 203). Many of McCarthy's conclusions about Vassar are more laudatory, yet all are juxtaposed with exhaustive and self-conscious asides about the 'right' baked potatoes, baseball players, and rail lines. Some of the class-bound consumer lessons of childhood, for McCarthy, could not be unlearned, even at Vassar. The result is lists. In the autobiographical *How I Grew*, McCarthy lists the books she read as a girl, in school, and at college. She lists train schedules and catalogues the boys she went out with, including one she fell in love with not only because of his 'bright-blue eyes,' 'crisp hair,' and 'amused mouth,' but also as a result of his car, his pipe, and the shoes and socks he wore. 'It was his accessories that seduced me,' she admits...When we look to *How I Grew* for a thoughtful tale of artistic development, McCarthy regales us with lists, lessons, and commercial inventories.

Which education is the 'real' education for McCarthy--the Vassar education of which she says, 'They were trying to teach us to stand on our own' (206), or the consumer education to conformity McCarthy self-deprecatingly concedes that she cannot forget...Are McCarthy and the women she creates in fiction simply bourgeois materialists, or do requests for Log Cabin syrup and Del Monte peaches signal some more complex politics? Again and again, her writing depends on educated young women with the ability to learn the consumer idiom...

What some have criticized as the 'obsessive irrelevant detail' of McCarthy's autobiographical writing I see as the communication of a specifically female and American idea of intellect. McCarthy was certainly not the first American woman to write about the kinds of limited and limiting empowerment offered by knowledge of brand names, but she wrote much more about the links between female reading, materialism, and politics than most critics seem to have noticed. What is at work here is the tension that McCarthy sensed between the mass-produced nature of the commodity and society's claim that it could represent or express a unique subjectivity for women. McCarthy's reliance on products as referents suggests her acknowledgment of the tension between the idea of the uniqueness of the intellectual woman, and the idea that her unique subjectivity could be expressed through the purchase and use of mass-produced goods.

Part of the strategy of brand names in her writing is a call for authenticity, a love of detail like that she wrote about in the essay 'Fact in Fiction.' The language of brand names here is the language of good taste, expert knowledge, 'originality,' and social distinctions. Distinctions between things mirror the kinds of distinctions McCarthy makes between people. The same questions are asked, and copies, forgeries, and fakes are forbidden. The only way to represent an authentic, intelligent American woman is to create an educated consumer. McCarthy...used consumerist claims to understand herself in autobiography and to create others in fiction....McCarthy self-deprecatingly validates her own consumerism with a reminder that she is also a consumer of high culture...[such as] Proust...

Locating both McCarthy's guilt about and joy in commodity culture participation historically suggests links to the political climate of the 1930s, an easing of the transition from that era's depression-bred psychology of scarcity to an

acceptance of spending in a mid-century culture which insisted on women's primary role as consumers, and finally, the un-selfconscious celebration of consumerism that has become the American norm....

She creates an identity through consumption, translating her story into the communicable substance of the books on her shelf. McCarthy's work raises questions about the kinds of knowledge which have offered women legitimacy in America. For most of the century, with the exception of avant-garde intellectuals and a small number of politically active feminists, few women were able to articulate alternatives to a consciousness hung up on 'knowing' about brand names or to resist attempts to alleviate misery with goods. McCarthy expresses an unabashed joy at being able to enact her childhood study of Vogue, yet her resilient belief in the potential for individualism and upward mobility stand in contrast to the painful contradictions of a society in which female success and enculturation are measured by the depth with which women assimilate and learn to surround themselves with the right commodities. In the piecing together of *How I Grew*, we see the framing of McCarthy's perverse pride in her knowledge of brand names as a complicated acceptance of models of selfhood from a culture in which limits are put on the female intellect."

Jill Wacker
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