

ANALYSIS

Memories of a Catholic Girlhood (1957)

Mary McCarthy

(1912-1989)

"Miss McCarthy, who writes better than most people, here writes better than herself. In this slow-grown book there is almost none of her dismaying heartless, though brilliant, satire. She records with her customary sensibility, but not with the eye cast coldly; rather, at last, with passion and compassion, with commitment of herself."

W. T. Scott
New York Herald Tribune
(26 May 1957)

"No virtue is more intimidating than truth-telling.... Fortunately, it is nearly impossible of accomplishment. For truth, no matter how plain or unvarnished, is also so multiple-faced that few can see it whole. Mary McCarthy has had a try at it in the latest of her brilliant books...and it is a highly talented try. Whether she has succeeded or not no one can say for a certainty."

Phyllis McGinley
Saturday Review
(8 June 1957)

"Miss McCarthy's new book has a quality of gentleness and warmth for which her earlier fiction scarcely prepared us.... What she has written so far has been of the fashionably acid and shocking kind: it is concerned on the whole, even to the point of ruthlessness, with the discrepancy in an urban and aggressive society between moral jargon and the inanity of pretentious action, with the atrophy of feeling and the protective surrogate of sentimentality and middle-class convention. These defects in our life she has represented with an unmerciful eye for weakness and vulgarity. *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* is no less skeptical toward the world of the past half-century in which she grew up, but it is more perceptive, more critical of her own resources of understanding, and therefore, more mature, than any of her previous fiction."

Victor Lange
The New Republic
(24 June 1957) 18

"*Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, Mary McCarthy's account of her childhood and adolescence, has made clearer to me the traits which make her the particular sort of artist she is. They are, I believe, perfectionism, a fanatical striving for honesty, and a fierce sense of hierarchy--a combination calculated to produce a thoroughly disturbing vision of life. For to the perfectionist, things-as-they-are appear for the most part lamentably worse than they ought to be; the cult of honesty makes it a duty to portray this state of affairs as unsparingly as possible; and in a hierarchical order, it is always easy to disgrace oneself but almost impossible to behave so well as to transcend one's station.... The portraiture of her recollections is more tolerant of human frailties than in her fiction and therefore more attractive and richer in vitality."

Charles J. Rolo
Atlantic Monthly
(June 1957) 90-91

"Mary McCarthy's *Memories* should take this year's Pulitzer Prize for being the Number 1 Cry-Baby-Book of the year. Her stylish profiles, etched in bitter acid, prove that this woman who should have reached maturity a long time ago, is still the pouting child, the youthful rebel, the adolescent skeptic, and the cute exhibitionist of her earlier years."

N. W. Logal

"*Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* achieves coherence through certain persistent themes which...also 'sustain' the fiction of Mary McCarthy.... The experiences that she dramatizes in *Memories* determined the kind of writer she would become.... Mary McCarthy very early became acquainted with hypocrisy.... [1] A major theme in *Memories* is Catholicism or, more precisely, the effects of Catholicism....

[2] A second major theme that runs through *Memories* concerns the contrast between outward appearance and internal reality. Like the recognition of hypocrisy (with which it is closely allied), this awareness has also affected Miss McCarthy's method as a writer. In 'To the Reader,' she recounts the first instance of her acknowledgment of the need to sustain outwardly acceptable behavior at the expense of inner truth. On the morning of her first Communion, she unthinkingly took a drink of water....

[3] The awareness of the discrepancy between the way things seem and the way things are and the resultant need to behave so as to preserve appearances introduces a third major theme--the necessity of compromise. This theme, which Miss McCarthy links with the acceptance of maturity, figures most prominently in her essays that deal primarily with education. For purposes of further analysis, the essays in *Memories* can be grouped into two distinct categories: those dealing with the McCarthy and Preston families, the stress being on character; and those concerning her life as a boarding-school student in Seattle and Tacoma, the stress being on education and an ever deepening awareness of the need to compromise....

One detractor has termed *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* the 'Number One Cry-Baby Book of the Year' and has characterized Mary McCarthy as the 'Boswell of her own ego.' Pointing out that to live joyfully one must love something, he concludes his 'review' in this fashion: 'Unable to find room in her heart for love, that empty, brittle heart has been unable to feed her emotions and intellect. She is left alone--floundering around on the hook of her own ego. That is, precisely, why she wants to resign from the human race. She writes well--but oh, with what an emptiness.' Discounting the absurdity that Mary McCarthy 'wants to resign from the human race,' what this reviewer fails to consider is that Miss McCarthy writes not from an abject despair but from a sense of disappointment in man and his institutions--a disillusionment caused by the discrepancy between expectancy and actuality or between high and noble ideals and their working out in the practicality of the every day. These are the recognitions that account for the emphasis on compromise and on the dull defeat of honesty. The theological philosopher may wish Mary McCarthy to have put her faith and love into a being larger than man, into a Creator or Divine Principle. But had she done so, that would have been another story and a different childhood. Another reviewer has questioned the use of 'Catholic' in the title, since those essays subsequent to 'Names' take place after she has left the Sacred Heart convent. This criticism discounts the pervasiveness of the influence of Catholicism.

Not so dominant, of course, is the theme of Jewishness.... As an adult, her attitude toward Jews evinces a fascination and tolerance similar in many respects to the feelings she assigned to her childhood self--as is apparent in much of her other writing, most particularly in 'Artists in Uniform'.... Critics have made much ado over Mary McCarthy's honesty in *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*.... As the sketches...indicate, Miss McCarthy in real life has had to struggle to be as truthful as she would like, a struggle heightened by a recognition of expediency and the accompanying subjugation of the 'whole' truth. These contradictory awarenesses help to explain both her preoccupation with honesty--in herself and in others--and her intense admiration of honesty where she finds it.... This personal ideal becomes objectified as a critical criterion to judge man and his activities."

Barbara McKenzie
Mary McCarthy
(Twayne 1966) 29, 31-33, 46-47

"The exquisitely written *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (1957) reveals how deeply rooted Miss McCarthy's stories are in her own life. She tells us that she was born in Seattle in 1912 to a Protestant mother, whose own mother was Jewish and who accepted her husband's religion, and a Catholic father. The mother was beautiful. The father was a partial invalid, irresponsible as a breadwinner, but handsome, charming, a delight to his children with his stories and presents. When she was six both parents died in one

week from flu. The rich McCarthy grandparents, whose Catholicism was a 'sour and baleful doctrine in which old hates and rancors had been stewing for generations, with ignorance proudly stirring the pot,' placed her and her three brothers in a house as poor as their own was luxurious and under the guardianship of a couple of Dickensian monster, a great-aunt and a German-American husband. The theme of the first chapters of *Memories* is injustice, and Miss McCarthy describes the needless poverty, the ugliness, the sadistic, self-righteous beatings with an unaccustomed, if controlled, intensity of rage and pity.

At the age of eleven she was rescued and taken to Seattle by her other grandfather, also rich, but a model of the Protestant virtues. To city qualities, she later found he shared with Julius Caesar, Grandfather Preston was 'just, laconic, severe, magnanimous, detached.' She was no longer wretched, but she remained an outsider--in her new home, whose moral standards were oppressively high; in the Catholic convent school she went to first, where she lost her faith; later in a public school, among the school 'hearties'; finally in an Episcopal boarding school, where she was set apart by her 'brilliance' and her independence. And here, at sixteen, she underwent experiences which, as described in the chapter of *Memories* called 'The Figures in the Clock,' clearly foreshadow the characteristic morel vision, and even the organizing 'conflicts,' of the fiction to come.

In this chapter it is a conflict between the wicked conspirator Catiline and Julius Caesar. Acting the part of Catiline in a play written by her Latin teacher, she made a sensation by reading her lines so as to vindicate the rebel, to champion his self-willed brilliance--and thereby her own--against mere dull law and order. Shortly after this, however, a strange thing happened. Under the guidance of Miss Gowrie (the fictitious name she gives her teacher), the girl fell in love with Julius Caesar.... What she loved in Caesar hints not only at the moral values in the novels to come, but at their art--their way with details and their way with sentences....

In 1962 the essays she had been writing since 1946 on a variety of subjects were collected in the volume *On the Contrary*.... Her essays on fiction and drama...constitute, by implication, a defense of the kind of art she herself has practiced. This is realistic art, which gives us what might usefully be called *samples* of reality rather than *symbols* of it. (She herself speaks of 'natural symbolism.'). For the reader to do justice to such work, he needs to be alert to human matters--the psychological or moral meaning of actions or tones--than to literary allusions and strategies."

Irvin Stock
Mary McCarthy
(U Minnesota 1968) 9-11, 13-14

"She had once looked upon religion as a 'branch of civics and conformity, 'but now she found herself standing on the edge of 'a cult of fashion and elegance in the sphere of religion,' whose baroque observances--the spoken French, the curtsies, the curtained beds in the dormitories, the rule of silence at mealtimes, the nun seated behind a screen in the bathroom, dispensing towels--took her breath away. Some dangerous and dramatic act was in order... 'If I could not win fame by goodness,' she calculated, 'in a cold, empty gambler's mood' in the fall of 1924, 'I was ready to do it by badness'....

At first she contemplated an affair with the Swedish barn who was the music master...but when reality intervened she settled on a more serious scandal. 'Say you've lost your faith,' the devil prompted, assuring me that there was no risk if I chose my moment carefully.' Say, on the Sunday before the Monday when the visiting Jesuit commenced a retreat. By Wednesday, when he held confessions, she could regain it, thus exposing her own immortal soul to a window of vulnerability of only four days' duration. In a Catholic milieu that abhorred organizational heretics such as Calvin and Luther, but retained a stealthy respect for great atheists and sinners like Marlowe, Baudelaire, and Byron, her scheme was bound to be a showstopper. 'It was a miracle that someone had not thought of it already...the idea seemed so obvious, like a store waiting to be robbed'.... Mary McCarthy *did* pretend to lose her faith, and lose it, and then *pretend* to get it back again... 'It was the idea of being noticed that consumed all [her] attention'...

When Father Dennis challenges her to consider how a 'mere man' could have been capable of the 'wisdom and goodness' that were to be found in the life and teachings of Jesus, she considers it and

concludes, "'Why not?' ...she could no longer understand why the simple fact that Christ was an *exception* proved that He was God'."

Carol Brightman
Writing Dangerously: Mary McCarthy and Her World
(Clarkson Potter 1992) 37-38, 41, 43, 45

[McCarthy prided herself on being factual, yet in making the most important decision of her life--quoted above--she ignored all the facts that prove Christ's divinity except *one*: he was "exceptional." Her reasoning is reductive in the extreme, as she considers only *one* "simple fact." She is not seeking the truth, she is seeking attention--willing to "win fame" by badness. A typical liberal, she ignores facts contrary to her preference. The most important fact she ignores is that Christ *died* and then rose from the dead, just as he said he would. Then, according to witnesses, he levitated into the sky.

The Roman soldiers in attendance did not break the legs of Jesus on the cross because he was clearly dead. One of them pierced his side with a spear to make sure. Another reported the fact to Pilate: Jesus was dead. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus wrapped the body and placed it in a tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph witnessed this. The tomb was sealed and guarded by Roman soldiers. On Sunday morning Peter and John went to the tomb and found it unsealed--open and empty. The Roman soldiers, facing execution for losing the body, were gone. The living Jesus then appeared to: (1) Mary Magdalene; (2) other women at the tomb; (3) Peter in Jerusalem; (4) two travelers on the road; (5) ten apostles behind closed doors; (6) all the apostles excluding Judas, including Thomas, to whom Jesus showed the wounds from his crucifixion; (7) seven apostles while fishing; (8) eleven apostles on the mountain; (9) a crowd of 500; (10) Jesus's brother James; and (11) those who watched Jesus ascend into Heaven: "Then Jesus led them to Bethany, and lifting his hands to heaven, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up to heaven."]

Michael Hollister (2020)

"*Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* recounts both the positive (education, love of beauty, Latin) and the negative (vulgarity, lies, hypocrisy) features of McCarthy's Catholic education and upbringing. Yet, although this is her only writing explicitly on the Church, not even a close reading of her fiction and essays is necessary to see the influence of the Church in her writing and thinking: ecclesiastical allusions abound. Like Flannery O'Connor, McCarthy does not directly write about Catholics or the Church, but in her strong sense of morality, of punishment, of self-criticism, McCarthy's sensibilities are clearly Catholic--Irish Catholic.

There are also Catholic characters, such as Meg Sargent and her vulgar Aunt Clara in *The Company She Keeps*, where Meg's psyche is deformed by her upbringing and she is caught between what Thelma Shinn defines as 'two sets of values': the modern, intellectual, bohemian woman that she aspires to be, and the antimodern or 'traditional values of feminine stereotypes and Catholic dogma in which she was raised.' Her heroines from Meg to Martha Sinnot in *A Charmed Life* to Kay in *The Group* all suffer from this tension, and it is never resolved: Martha and Kay die, and Meg begs for merely the awareness of her fate.

Ironically, although she herself lived the life of a bohemian, sleeping with many men, drinking, traveling, writing, it becomes increasingly clear that McCarthy, like the Church, was quite conservative. Although McCarthy *outgrew* Catholicism [anti-Christian; italics added], as an adult she continuously tested and rejected what can be seen as twentieth-century replacements for the authority and promises of religion such as politics and psychoanalysis. In *Memories* she painfully recalls how at age fourteen she got the priest to admit that there is a gap between faith and experience that cannot be filled with reason: "'Natural reason, Mary,' expatiated Father Heeney, 'will not take you the whole way today. There's a little gap that we have to fill with faith.' I looked up at him measuringly. So there was a gap, then. How was it that they had never mentioned this interesting fact to us before?' This gap both disturbed and obsessed McCarthy. She insisted yet doubted that reason could correct this discrepancy, and this tension is felt in her works and seen in her life. 'Faith' by Catholic definition is a virtue that requires God's grace, not man's....

Bruce Cook, writing for a conservative Catholic journal, extends the metaphor of the child within the adult beyond her heroines to McCarthy herself. He sees *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* as an attack on

her Grandmother Preston, her Uncle Myers, all the adults of her childhood who failed her: 'She has kept alive the twelve-year-old's romantic notions of love and her fear of sex, the scrupulous interest in motivation with its attendant casuistry and passion for analysis.... All schoolgirls are Jansenists; some, however, do grow out of it.' Yet what Cook fails to see in his attack on McCarthy is that, like her heroines, she was a product of her own time, a time when girls, especially bright girls, were encouraged to look toward men for authority, to please all adults, and to put their own needs on hold. The reason for McCarthy's passive heroines may simply be her way of destroying her past selves, allowing her, in her own life, to move on.

Perhaps this is why McCarthy's satire of her heroines is tempered by her sympathy for them and their modern predicament. She feels that they have lost something--perhaps a sense of utility, or perhaps a sense of knowing what their role as women should be--and the effects of this loss are disastrous. In a Lawrencean sense, their faith in ideology has cut them off from reality and their own natures as women. Oddly, it is still a rather feminist position in the way it acknowledges the tension of women torn between two conflicting ideals. Her heroines declare their sexual freedom and intellectual independence, and are willing to compete in the world with men, but ultimately they are undermined by self-doubt, shame, and an internalization of Catholicism, which lead to a desperate search for someone to tell them what to do, and some structure to tell them how to do it."

Stacey Lee Donohue
"Reluctant Radical: The Irish-Catholic Element"
Twenty-Four Ways (1996) 90-93

"And then there is *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*. It is unlike any other autobiography--distinguished, singular. Isn't that what we say when it's real art? The very pace of the writing is superb, the italicized postscripts a brilliant invention. Though, of course, she lied. I knew that she lied when I first read 'C'est le Premier Qui Coute' (102-26). I knew that no Catholic secondary school, even the lofty Mesdames de Sacre Coeur, let kids have a go at theology. The religious education was all catechism, dogma, doctrine plain and simple in Bridgeport as well as in Seattle. But turn the page: 'The proofs of God's existence,' she confesses, 'are drawn from the Catholic Encyclopedia. My own questions are a mixture of memory and conjecture.'

Then there is this: 'Maybe the strange mixture is why I don't remember very much. Or, as time and much of life has passed, my memory--which for the purpose of this tale has kept me awake sorting out what I am certain of, what maybe I added to what, because I didn't see or know the people--won't supply what I need to know.' Those are the words of Lillian Hellman in *Maybe*, an odd, powerful work written as fiction after the Cavett debacle (Interview with Dick Cavett). I have always read it as a riposte to McCarthy, who had called her a liar. I was a friend of Lillian Hellman's, not a close friend for I keep in my private life to a small domestic circle. Let me say that I hated the fact of their argument; for both of these women that last match with no final round. I have no particular knowledge to exonerate Hellman, yet I will never know what truth McCarthy was after. Their argument was politics of an era *and* it was personal, or it was about Cinderella and her unlovely stepsister, or about the display of honor and dishonor. That is a bit of mythmaking on my part: it was all too real to these women, painfully facing each other down. What I think Mary McCarthy did not miss, but certainly disliked in Lillian Hellman, was performance, the ongoing performance of that flamboyant life.

I was asked to write, not by Lillian, in defense of Hellman, an article that would be carefully placed. I did not lend myself to this: I wrote, however, a novel, *Expensive Habits*, in which the central figure, a woman journalist, sets herself to writing an expose of the old heroines of the Old Left. She comes upon two elderly women who, with conflicting stories, close her out. There is no truth to get at, beyond what the reporter has guessed. She writes small fictional accounts of these women and of their lover. Even these she destroys. The expensive habit of the title is lying. And it is writing. To me--now I am writing fiction--Mary McCarthy's obsession with Hellman's duplicity, or maybe with her political grandstanding, her 'artistic' license, partakes of a mad double plot that might have been written by her beloved Nabokov. She would not like my moving the facts of the case to fiction. Or that I see her as the missionary, the very missionary we Catholic girls laughed at, stern and diligent among the heathens, believing in truth--not about Hellman, or *Partisan Review* politics, or old boyfriends--but the undeniable facts that drew her to the upper story of

almost blessed intelligence which made her work valid. As for the secular act of writing, there was in her own performance a sense that writing was to her a touch sacred."

Maureen Howard
"Memories of Another Catholic Girlhood"
Twenty-Four Ways (1996) 197-98

"To this matter-of-fact approach she brought something of the spirit, if not the actual prose, of George Orwell, whose gritty memoir of boarding school days...had appeared posthumously in *Partisan Review* only two years before.... Frank and analytic, this approach came naturally to her. Moreover, it allowed her to satisfy the objections of critics like Delmore Schwartz, who had argued that *The New Yorker's* memoir form did not make for intellectual rigor....

Memoirs of a Catholic Girlhood came out in late spring of 1957 to reviews of a kind she was not accustomed to seeing.... She had pieced together a book that seemed almost serene in its self-assurance. Somehow she succeeded in portraying the sorrows and upheavals of her troubled girlhood while suggesting, without ever quite saying it, that she had put such sorrows behind her. If there was anger, there was also humor and intelligence and an attempt at fairness. With her insistence on getting at the truth and her refusal to see herself as a victim, she touched the hearts of critics who had long since categorized her as a writer so clear-sighted as to be lacking in all feeling. On balance, men were more smitten than women. And Protestants and Jews were more sympathetic than Catholics."

Frances Kiernan
Seeing Mary Plain: A Life of Mary McCarthy
(Norton 2000) 435

Although she emphasized facts and her Catholic upbringing, Mary McCarthy was often inaccurate about the Bible. In "The Genial Host" she compares herself to "Peter in the Garden...social pressure had made Peter deny the Master." But Peter did not deny Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, in fact he defended him with his sword. It was at the house of Caiaphas, the high priest, where Peter denied knowing Christ three times. And to be precise, the specific cause was less mere "social pressure" than fear of death. In "Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man," like many liberals McCarthy implies that Jesus was a socialist, whereas in fact, disappointing many Jews at the time, the teachings of Jesus focus entirely on the spiritual dimension, he did not advocate overthrowing any earthly government: he said "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's." In making this claim, McCarthy says of "most socialists": "They resembled the original twelve apostles in the New Testament; there was no real merit in their adherence, and no hope either." It is McCarthy who sees "no merit" and "no hope" in following Christ. She projects her own disbelief and cynicism even onto "the original twelve apostles," though in fact, all but one of the apostles saw so much merit and had so much hope they were willing to suffer and die for Christ.

McCarthy's atheism leads her to disregard the Bible and to make many such ridiculous pronouncements. For another example, she declares that "Christ could forgive himself for being God only by becoming Man, just as a millionaire can excuse his riches by saying, 'I was a poor boy once myself.'" As a Marxist, she compares God to a guilt-ridden capitalist and salvation to wealth. Yet she herself is a literary capitalist who enjoys hurting the people she exploits for profit in her fiction: "There is something savorless about a profit that has not been made at somebody else's expense."

Michael Hollister (2020)