

ANALYSIS

"On the Contrary" (1961)

Mary McCarthy

(1912-1989)

"In her new book, *On the Contrary*, she has written her two best essays: 'Characters in Fiction' and 'Fact in Fiction.' In their manner and feeling these essays suggest a new gravity and sympathy, a subtle change in the air, a change already felt in her large books on Florence and Venice. As for the ideas in the two essays: they are the only new things said about the art of the novel in many years. Paraphrase is difficult because the examples are very fresh and the insights rather angular.

On 'Fact in Fiction': fact, 'this love of truth, ordinary, common truth recognizable to everyone, is the ruling passion of the novel. [Realism] Putting two and two together, then, it would seem that the novel, with its common sense, is of all forms the least adapted to encompass the modern world, whose leading characteristic is irreality.' As for 'Character in Fiction,' the decline in the ability to create character comes, in this view, from the modern [Modernist] tendency to try to reach character from the inside [such as Joyce in *Ulysses* and Faulkner in *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*]. The author has become a sort of ventriloquist; he is not content to describe but must try to impersonate the very soul of someone quite different from himself. The reader is perplexed, he feels the strain, the insecurity. Water has been put into the whisky; the dilution is the poor author himself, struggling to blend in."

Elizabeth Hardwick
"Mary McCarthy"
American Fictions
(Modern Library 1999) 211