



Mary McCarthy

(1912-1989)

Mary McCarthy was a liberal journalist known for biting satire. She added to her reputation with two novels, *The Company She Keeps* (1942), about New York intellectuals in the radical 1930s, and *The Group* (1963), about graduates of Vassar--based on some of her former classmates. Orphaned at age 6, she was raised by Catholic relatives who treated her harshly, then by a Jewish grandmother. She was educated by Catholics, rebelled and became an atheist. Among her many lovers was the critic Philip Rahv and among her four husbands the critic Edmund Wilson. She was associated with the *Partisan Review*, sustained a long friendship with the radical Hannah Arendt, vigorously opposed the Vietnam War and supported the American enemy the Vietcong. McCarthy became a Trotskyite in reaction to the infamous Moscow Trials, precipitating a bitter feud with the Communist screenwriter Lillian Hellman, a Stalinist. After McCarthy called Hellman a liar on television, Hellman sued her, but died before the case went to trial. Ultimately the lawsuit damaged Hellman by publicizing her dishonesty and disloyalty. Yet as a liberal, McCarthy also opposed Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s for exposing liberals as enablers of Communist spies and propagandists like Hellman. At the same time, Mary McCarthy's brother the actor Kevin McCarthy portrayed Senator Joe McCarthy as a hero in the movie *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* in 1956, an anti-Communist allegory produced by the conservative Walter Wanger.

ORDER OF TOPICS: girlhood, rebellion, progressive education, Vassar, Neoclassicism, ideas, Existentialism, writing, teaching, human nature, Americans, Europe, labor, government, capitalism, radical politics, Marxism, Lillian Hellman, forgiveness, anti-Semitism, sex, love, marriage, men, women, feminism, triteness, expertise, science, the rich, taste, morality, religion, God, death:

GIRLHOOD

When I was eight, I began writing poetry at school.

The beatings with hairbrush and razor-strop I can still resent, but abstractly, as injustice.

The injustices my brothers and I had suffered in our childhood had made me a rebel against authority, but they had also prepared me to fall in love with justice, the first time I encountered it.

One of the great shocks connected with the loss of my parents was an aesthetic one; even if my guardians had been nice, I should probably not have liked them because they were so unpleasing to look at and their grammar and accents were so lacking in correctness.

I now suspect that my stage ambitions were merely the vehicle for a hope to be acclaimed for my beauty.

Playing children is a long boring game with occasional exciting moments.

Almost from the beginning, I had been aware of myself as "bright."

I dreamed of becoming a Carmelite nun, like the great St. Teresa.

My pride, I imagine, undid me; I could not stand to be wrong.

I was a firm believer in absolutes: the lack of shadings.

My laughter is a victory over circumstances.

Laughter is the great antidote for self-pity.

I was given leading parts (usually male).

I am a fairly transparent person.

For me, excess was attractive.

Dreams substituted for thought.

I was the top student in my class.

REBELLION

I lost my faith very easily.

I had always liked to argue with the clergy.

A juvenile half enamored of the dark principle.

I knew perfectly well that children could not pray to be delivered to evil and was only being clever.

If I could not win fame by goodness...I was ready to do it by badness.

PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION

What she hated about the modern was her own refusal to face the present.

The present can try to bury the past, an operation that is most atrocious when it is most successful.

What they wanted to introduce into their region was a center of "personalized" education, with courses tailored to the individual need, like their own foundation-garments.

We're turning out classes of sophisticated literary hollow men, without general ideas, without the philosophy or theology that's formed in adolescence, without the habit of the discipline of systematic thought.

VASSAR

There is too much smart talk, too many labels for things, too much pseudo-cleverness. I suppose I'll get that way, too, though I'm doing my best to avoid it.

Vassar had inspired us with the notion that the wide, wide world was our oyster. A few years later, a census was taken, and it was discovered that the average Vassar graduate had two-plus children and was married to a Republican lawyer.

NEOCLASSICISM

Caesar, of course, was my grandfather: just, laconic, severe, magnanimous, detached.

At least, I adored Catullus, and Juvenal; those were the two I really passionately loved. And Caesar, when I was a girl.... And Stendhal I like very, very much.

They felt something of the Augustan amplitude in the tidal swell of the dactyl breaking on the shoal of the caesura.

IDEAS

A student reads an author for his ideas, for his personal metaphysic.

[*The Group*]: It's supposed to be the history of the loss of faith in progress, in the idea of progress, during that twenty-year period.

Both held the advanced ideas that had been current in the eighteen-sixties and that remained advanced in the present era, though with a certain pathos, like an old hat that has never been worn.

Once the notion [of equality] was introduced into the human mind, existence became unbearable, and yet once there it can never be banished.

The idea seemed so obvious, like a store waiting to be robbed.

EXISTENTIALISM

I suppose everyone continues to be interested in the quest for the self, but what you feel when you're older, I think, is that you really must make the self.

We all live in suspense from day to day; in other words, you are the hero of your own story.

WRITING

After we'd been married for about a week, he [Edmund Wilson] said, "I think you have a talent for writing fiction." And he put me in a little room. He didn't literally lock the door, but he said "Stay in there!" And I did. I just sat down, and it just came. It was the first story I had ever written, really: the first story in *The Company She Keeps* ["Cruel and Barbarous Treatment"]

Sentences were short, and points in the argument clicked like bright billiard balls.

The remark dropped like a stone into the pool of silence, setting up echoes of itself, little ripples of sound that spread and spread and finally died away. [Impressionism]

I would like to try to restore the author. Because you find that if you obey this Jamesian injunction of "Dramatize, dramatize," and especially if you deal with comic characters, as in my case, there is so much you can't say because you're limited by these mentalities.

I'm not sure any of my books are novels. Maybe none of them are. Something happens in my writing--I don't mean it to--a sort of distortion, a sort of writing on the bias, seeing things with a sort of swerve and sweep.

The difference between a great novelist and a merely competent one lies in whether the writer can reach beyond personal experience into the impersonal realm of the imagination.

The best satire seems to spring from hatred and repugnance: Swift, Juvenal, Martial, Pope.... Satire, I suspect, is usually written by powerless people; it is an act of revenge.

The old man's frail, difficult poems, which had emerged from the Imagist movement, convoluted and pale, like sea-shells.

The suspense of a novel is not only in the reader, but in the novelist, who is intensely curious about what will happen to the hero.

What I really do is take real plums and put them in an imaginary cake. [echo of Marianne Moore]

I am trying to curb an overly satirical and self-recriminatory tendency in my work.

TEACHING

I've always refused to teach creative writing.

I adored teaching at Bard, yes. But the students were so poor at Sarah Lawrence that I didn't enjoy it there.

Whenever, during the summer, he took a party of students abroad under his genial wing, catastrophic events attended him. As he sat sipping his vermouth and introducing himself to tourists at the Flore or the Deux Magots, the boys and girls under his guidance were being robbed, eloping to Italy, losing their passports, slipping off to Monte Carlo, seeking out an abortionist, deciding to turn queer, cabling the decision to their parents, while he took out his watch and wondered why they were late in meeting him for the expedition to Saint-Germain-en-Laye.

The victim, here as elsewhere, of that ferocious envy of mediocrity for excellence that is the ruling passion of all systems of jobholders.

HUMAN NATURE

Surprise, of all reactions was the most difficult to imitate, for one was always an instant too late.

Mr. Sheer could shut off sections of his life, as a submarine can shut off compartments, and still survive.

Being abroad makes you conscious of the whole imitative side of human behavior. The ape in man.

The utter misery of his situation had sprung on him...like an animal at the throat.

Appearances intimate to us; they do not flatly deceive.

All handsome people are monists.

In violence, we forget who we are.

AMERICANS

The Gold Rush, the Frontier was a substitute sort of equality.

It is not the poet but the silver-tongued lawyer who is our real national bard.

The inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness appear, in practice, to have become the inalienable right to a bathtub, a flush toilet, and a can of Spam.

Probably in the twenties there were more converts made to hedonism than to any other faith, and that still may be the "message" of the most influential fiction of today, from Mailer to Updike.

The American character looks always as if it had just had a bad haircut, which gives it, in our eyes at any rate, a greater humanity than the European, which even among its beggars has an all too professional air.

In verity we are the poor. This humanity we would claim for ourselves is the legacy, not only of the Enlightenment, but of the thousands and thousands of European peasants and poor townspeople who came here bringing their humanity and their sufferings with them. It is the absence of a stable upper class that is responsible for much of the vulgarity of the American scene. Should we blush before the visitor for this deficiency?

Inequality, we would like to believe, is a law of nature, and by "we" I do not mean only wealthy businessmen or blackguards like Senator McCarthy or Southern racists. As the richest nation in the world, we have developed the psychology of rich people: we are afraid of poverty, of "agitators," of any jarring notes in the national harmony.

The American, if he has a spark of national feeling, will be humiliated by the very prospect of a foreigner's visit to Congress--these, for the most part, illiterate hacks whose fancy vests are spotted with gravy and whose speeches, hypocritical, unctuous and slovenly, are spotted also with the gravy of political patronage, these persons are a reflection on the democratic process...they expose it in its underwear.

America was the classless society, though not the kind Marx had pictured; Marx could not have foreseen this country of ours, where everybody, workers included, was middle-class.

It was the ugly cartoon of middle-class life that she detested.

EUROPE

The immense popularity of American movies abroad demonstrates that Europe is the unfinished negative of which America is the proof.

I don't feel any more this antithesis of Young America, Old Europe. I think that's really gone.

Venice, as a city, was a foundling, floating upon the waters like Moses in his basket.

The only really materialistic people I have ever met have been Europeans.

Life for the European is a career; for the American it is a hazard.

LABOR

The labor of keeping house is labor in its most naked state, for labor is toil that never finishes, toil that has to be begun again the moment it is completed, toil that is destroyed and consumed by the life process.

Labor is work that leaves no trace behind it when it is finished, or if it does, as in the case of the tilled field, this product of human activity requires still more labor, incessant, tireless labor, to maintain its identity as a "work" of man.

GOVERNMENT

Liberty, as it is conceived by current opinion, has nothing inherent about it; it is a sort of gift or trust bestowed on the individual by the state pending good behavior.

Bureaucracy, the rule of no one, has become the modern form of despotism.

CAPITALISM

[President] Johnson and his advisers, like all Americans, are the conditioned subjects of the free-enterprise system.... A sense of compulsion, dictated by the laws of the market, permeates every nerve of the national life.

It has to be acknowledged that in capitalist society, with its herds of hippies, originality has become a sort of fringe benefit, a mere convention, accepted obsolescence, the Beatnik model being turned in for the Hippie model, as though strangely obedient to capitalist laws of marketing.

RADICAL POLITICS

Rumor had it that there were quite a few pinks in the publishing biz.

My first husband had worked at the Theater Union, which was a radical group downtown that put on proletarian plays, and there were lots of Communists in that. Very few Socialists. And so I knew all these people; I knew that kind of person. But I wasn't very sympathetic to them.

The counter-culture is convinced that all Americans except themselves are war-makers...indistinguishable from war criminals. Such virtuous "indictments" of a whole culture in its ordinary pursuits are politically sterile.

In politics, it seems, retreat is honorable if dictated by military considerations and shameful if even suggested for ethical reasons.

The truth was that...her proletarian sympathies constituted a sort of snub that she administered to the middle class, just as a really smart woman will outdress her friends by relentlessly underdressing them.

To be exact, *Partisan Review* had existed as a Stalinist magazine, and then it had died, gone to limbo. But after the Moscow trials, the *PR* boys, Rahv and Phillips, revived it.... As an anti-Stalinist magazine.

I got swept into the whole Trotskyite movement.

We never even dreamed that the Russians were going to get the atomic bomb.

I still believe in a kind of libertarian socialism, a decentralized socialism.

MARXISM

Scratch a socialist and you find a snob.

From each according to his abilities, which is the same as saying, in my Father's house, there are many mansions [meaning Marx and Jesus are in accord, which they are not].

Partisan Review was a Party publication, the organ of the local John Reed Club. But I had no inkling of that then; skill in recognizing Communists came to me much later.

Marxism, I saw, from the learned young man I listened to at Committee meetings, was something you had to take up young, like ballet dancing.

Marxism was to become for Jim's generation what an actress had been for the youths of the Gilded Age. During the first years of the New Deal, there were many flirtations.

He could not drop into the life of a Communist front man, because this would have involved a suspension of individual judgment, a surgical sterilization of the moral faculty.

[Philip Rahv] could always offend me by declaring that I was bourgeois because I could not learn to think like a Marxist.

He thought that you could probably trust Mr. Roosevelt and Comrade Stalin to abrogate liberty only just so much as was absolutely necessary--and always in the right direction, that is, to abrogate your opponent's liberty rather than your own.

To care for the quarrels of the past, to identify oneself passionately with a cause that became, politically speaking, a losing cause with the birth of the modern world, is to experience a kind of straining against reality, a rebellious nonconformity that, again, is rare in America, where children are instructed in the virtues of the system they live under [not anymore], as though history had achieved a happy ending in American civics.

What I was witnessing was the breakup of the Party's virtual monopoly on the thought of the left. Among the writers who had been converted to Marxism by the Depression, Farrell was one of the first to free himself.... An orthodoxy was cracking, like ice floes on the Volga.

[Anti-Communist intellectuals lived] in terror of a revival of the situation that prevailed in the Thirties, when the fellow travelers were powerful in teaching, publishing, the theatre, etc.

He was one of those birds that are more Communist than the Communists in theory, but you'll never meet them on the picket-line.

He saw that the Marxists were never going to get anywhere until they took a real look at the American scene and stopped deluding themselves with theory.

I do admire Trotsky. He's the most romantic man in modern times.

LILLIAN HELLMAN

Every word she [Lillian Hellman] writes is a lie, including *and* and *the*.

To be disesteemed by people you don't have much respect for is not the worst fate.

If someone had told me, don't say anything about Lillian Hellman because she'll sue you, it wouldn't have stopped me. It might have spurred me on. I didn't want her to die. I wanted her to lose in court. I wanted her around for that.

An unrectified case of injustice has a terrible way of lingering, restlessly, in the social atmosphere like an unfinished question.

There's no satisfaction in having an enemy die--you have to beat them.

FORGIVENESS

Understanding is often a prelude to forgiveness, but they are not the same, and we often forgive what we cannot understand (seeing nothing else to do) and understand what we cannot pardon.

ANTI-SEMITISM

Anti-Semitism is a horrible disease from which nobody is immune, and it has a kind of evil fascination that makes an enlightened person draw near the source of infection, supposedly in a scientific spirit, but really to sniff the vapors and dally with the possibility.

I myself had a curious attitude, I now realize, in which the crudest anti-Semitism...mingled with infatuation and with genuine tolerance and detachment. I *liked* Uncle Mose and Aunt Rosie far better than any other older people I knew.

Calling someone a monster does not make him more guilty; it makes him less so by classing him with beasts and devils.

SEX

Every age has a keyhole to which its eye is pasted.

What a ludicrous action if looked at from a rational standpoint.

As a schoolgirl, she had exchanged dirty jokes with the college boys from Eugene and seen them stop the car and lunge at her across the gearshift.

She held herself stony in his embrace, and felt indeed like a rock being lapped by some importunate wave.

Quickly she helped him take off the black dress, and stretched herself out on the berth like a slab of white lamb on an altar.

[Crosby] became very educational, encouraging me to sit up and examine his stiffened organ, which to me looked quite repellent, all flushed and purplish.

Once I got started, I saw all sorts of men that winter. Often one led to another. Most of them I slept with at least one time.

Two of my adulteries were only once, in the afternoon, and the third was with a little Communist actor who wore lifts in his shoes--too earnest for me to really like.

Of all the men I slept with in my studio-bed on Gay Street (and there were a lot: I stopped counting) I liked Bill Mangold the best. Until I began to see Philip Rahv.

It was getting rather alarming. I realized one day that in twenty-four hours I had slept with three different men. And one morning I was in bed with somebody while over his head I talked on the telephone with someone else... I did not feel promiscuous. Maybe no one does. And maybe more girls sleep with more men than you would ever think to look at them.

By a queer reversal, the very safety pin in her underwear, which she had blushed for earlier in the morning, came to look to her now like a symbol of moral fastidiousness, just as the sores of a mendicant saint can, if thought of in the right way, testify to his spiritual health.

This freedom of speech of hers was a kind of masquerade of sexuality, like the rubber breasts that homosexuals put on for drags, but, like the dummy breasts, its brazenness betrayed it: it was a poor copy and a hostile travesty all at once.

Could she not say that all that conjugal tenderness had been a brightly packaged substitute for the Real Thing, for the long carnal swoon she had never quite been able to execute in the marriage bed?

The man's whole assault...was an incidental atrocity in the long class war. She smiled again, thinking that she had come out of it untouched, while he had been reduced to jelly.

A proud, bitter smile formed on her lips, as she saw herself as a citadel of socialist virginity, that could be taken and taken again, but never truly subdued.

She fought him off, though she had an inclination to yield, if only to re-establish ascendancy over him.

It was not really romantic to be the girl-who-sits-in-the-club-car-and-picks-up-men.

You mustn't force sex to do the work of love or love to do the work of sex.

LOVE

One must love in depth.

Love is the discovery of essence.

We look to somebody else to discover our imperishable essence.

It was some failure in self-love that obliged her to snatch blindly at the love of others, hoping to love herself through them, borrowing their feelings, as the moon borrowed light.

I have seldom been capable of living without love.

I get stupid in solitude.

MARRIAGE

She seemed preoccupied, bored, polite. It was like kissing Nancy when she had toast in the toaster.

When I inherited a little bit of money from the McCarthy family--and I was earning a little bit of money from my writing--he made me put it into his bank account. And of course, I couldn't have signature power on his bank account. I had to ask him for a nickel to make a telephone call.

My own explanation (if I must give but a single one) for my yielding to Wilson is the Marxist explanation. It was the same old class struggle that Philip [Rahv] and I had been waging from the moment we fell in love. Wilson, relatively speaking, was upper class.

On July 5, 1944 while drunk he hit me with a chair, put his arm through a window pane and cut himself so badly that he almost bled to death before preventive measures could be applied. Since that time he has threatened me from time to time and by his actions has seemed so menacing that I have fled from our home for safety.

She could take his abrupt dictation and decipher his manuscript notes and hold the dinner till midnight if he did not feel like eating. She could keep the child quiet in the morning when he had been sleeping a binge off. When they read Aeschylus together...she looked up the hard words in the dictionary.... She kept the household accounts and never bothered him about money. If he felt like talking, she listened and asked intelligent questions.... She did not stimulate him--that was her only drawback.

You say your husband can't sleep with you because you're a "good woman." I suggest you enlighten him. Tell him what you do with Harald. And about the progressive school teacher with the wife and six children. That ought to get his pecker up. And have him take a look at this apartment. And at the ring around your neck. If a man slept with you, you'd leave a ring around him. Like your bathtub.

But a lot of basic things were the matter. Sex. Competitiveness with men.... And all the time she was driving [him] to make money, she was ruthlessly undercutting him because of her penis-envy. Plus a determination to punish him for not giving her a vicarious success.

Her marriage had been successful, and she attributed this to a single simple recipe.... She had never had a quarrel continue overnight. No matter how mad she was at Grandpa, she told me, she always kissed him good night. And...no matter how mad she was in the morning, she always kissed him goodbye before he went to the office.

The only way I can break off anything is to run away.

MEN

He squinted on his partner from a knot-hole of male assurance.

He lowered the pitch of his feeling; his thoughts went on tiptoe, gently, circling round her.

He held her in suspense for a moment--like a conductor, she thought, with raised baton over the woodwinds of her feelings.

He was deferential, ingratiating, concerned for your pleasure, like a waiter with a tray of French pastry in his hand.

It was as if the male and female strains in his personality had never blended, but were engaged in some perennial household spat that you were obliged to eavesdrop on.

Well-directed arrows of delight and welcome shot at you out of his black eyes, and his mouth curved downwards in a strenuous, sickle-shaped smile that gave his face an expression of cruelty.

Every word he uttered had a weight of great consideration, and his deep young voice creaked, like a pair of high shoes ascending a dark stairway with precaution.

Young husbands were supposed to go slightly on the loose when their wives were in the hospital having babies; it was the Yale thing, the manly thing, to do.

I never gave her anything to be jealous of. I protected her. Whenever I slept with a woman, I made sure Kay could never find out. That meant I could never break clean with them. No matter how fed up I was.

The very notion of assignations, trysts, affected him in much the same way that the notion of crop rotation affects the American farmer.

Jim, in a dim, half-holy way, felt that with his marriage he had taken up the cross of Everyman.

She had showed him the cage of his own nature.

He began to feel joyfully unhappy.

WOMEN

I'm afraid I'm not sufficiently inhibited about the things that other women are inhibited about for me. They feel that you've given away trade secrets.

[Simone de Beauvoir] made it through her sex by attaching herself to this man [Sartre], and many others of us have made it through our sex...but it's most ungrateful in her case. Her voice was like a pointer, moving sharply on a map or blackboard, which gave her an air of authoritative impersonality, though as a matter of fact she was congenitally nervous and suffered from intermittent eczema, asthma, shingles, and all the usual disorders of the repressed female brain-worker.

It was a peculiarity of this woman poet that she turned her whole body slowly from the waist when addressed by a new interlocutor, as though she were an obliging ear-trumpet maneuvering into position to take account of some strange new noise reaching her from afar.

Gertrude Stein's Indian-like face and body commanded our respect, and what she said was not very difficult. I was shocked to hear Louis Kronenberger, who wrote for *The Nation*, say angrily that she was a charlatan.

A doubt would suddenly dart out of her, like a mouse from its hole.

FEMINISM

As for Women's Lib, it bores me.

And in marriage--an equal division of tasks is impossible.

I've never noticed that women were less warlike than men.

Her tone, he thought, was precisely that of an army officer who professes to hate war.

She was exactly as gallant as a soldier who moves forward flourishing the standard, because he knows that if he does not do so, his officers will shoot him in the back.

You use your wonderful scruples as an excuse for acting like a bitch.

Nobody had told me that I was also the sister of the Harpies.

She had been driven by the demon of arrogance.

Of course I believe in equal pay and equality before the law and so on, but this whole myth about how different the world would have been if it had been female dominated, about how there would have been no wars--and Women's Lib extremists actually believe these things--seems a complete fantasy to me.

She was not one of those happy trouble-makers who toss the apple of discord around as though it were a child's ball.

TRITENESS

She could not bear to hurt her husband. She impressed this on the Young Man, on her confidantes, and finally on her husband himself. The thought of Telling Him actually made her heart turn over in a sudden and sickening way, she said. This was true, and yet she knew that being a potential divorcee was deeply pleasurable in somewhat the same way that being an engaged girl had been.... It was as if by the mere act of betraying her husband, she had adequately bested him... She and the Young Man began to tell each other in a rather breathless and literary style that the Situation Was Impossible, and Things Couldn't Go On This Way Any Longer....The gossip-value of a divorce and remarriage was obviously far greater than the gossip-value of a mere engagement, and she was now ready, indeed hungry, to hear What People Would Say... ["Cruel and Barbarous Treatment"]

EXPERTISE

They...had seized only on the literal and had failed of the moral, the allegorical, and the anagogical.

As happens with sports and hobbies, his enjoyment was solemnized by expertise, the rites of comparing, collating, a half-deliberate parody of scholarship like the recitation of batting averages.

SCIENCE

In science, all facts, no matter how trivial or banal, enjoy democratic equality.

THE RICH

When an American heiress wants to buy a man, she at once crosses the Atlantic.

The theater is the only branch of art much cared for by people of wealth; like canasta, it does away with the bother of talk after dinner.

TASTE

The old car was a cartoon of man's afflictions, out of Job by Laurel and Hardy.

A society person who is enthusiastic about modern painting or Truman Capote is already half a traitor to his class. It is middle-class people who, quite mistakenly, imagine that a lively pursuit of the latest in reading and painting will advance their status in the world.

The ideas he put forward, familiar enough when clothed in their usual phraseology, emerged in his writing in a state of undress that made them look exciting and almost new, just as a woman whom one has known for years is always something of a surprise without her clothes on.

MORALITY

Preserve me in disunity.

He shrugged off a twinge of conscience.

In morals as in politics anarchy is not for the weak.

The true self, like the poor relation, must be taught to keep his distance.

He felt a harsh desire to initiate that innocence, to ply it with brute facts, like drink.

I feel as if I had gotten somebody with child in the course of an innocent flirtation.

A nun in the convent, scolding me, said: "You're just like Lord Byron, brilliant but immoral.

So finally I agreed to marry Wilson as my punishment for having gone to bed with him.

Their Anglo-Saxon sense of fair play was warm for a moment between them--he could feel it in his stomach like a shot of whisky.

If someone tells you he is going to make a "realistic" decision, you immediately understand that he has resolved to do something bad.

The Crucifixion and other historical precedents notwithstanding, many of us still believe that outstanding goodness is a kind of armor, that virtue, seen plain and bare, gives pause to criminality. But perhaps it is the other way around.

As we climbed into the big bed, I knew, too late, that I had *done the wrong thing*. To marry a man without loving him, which was what I had done, not really perceiving it, was a wicked action.

You were gloriously happy because you had been rude and politically unfashionable, and really carried beyond yourself, an angel warrior with a flaming sword.

Is it really so difficult to tell a good action from a bad one? I think one usually knows right away or a moment afterward, in a horrid flash of regret.

It is a very easy matter to cut out the festering conscience, which was of no use to you at all, and was only making you suffer.

There is something savorless about a profit that has not been made at somebody else's expense.

People with bad consciences always fear the judgment of children.

RELIGION

There was no belief inside me.

There is always the temptation to gnosticism.

The teachings of the Church did not interest her [grandmother], except as they were a rebuke to others.

Insofar as I, a believing atheist, have a foot in any religion, I am a Protestant...and when I die I hope that some kindly Protestant pastor will say last rites over me even though I am outside his church.

From what I have seen, I am driven to the conclusion that religion is only good for good people.... For the others, it is too great a temptation--a temptation to the deadly sins of pride and anger, chiefly, but one might also add sloth.

Had it not been for the accident of being sent by my grandparents to an Episcopal boarding-school, I might still be as thorough an atheist as the convent had made me. Instead, through the hymns, through the book of Common Prayer, through our mild Sacred Study course, I regained bit by bit the underlying Christian doctrine which I accept today as being part of me, whether I like it or not.

It would be false to say that Venetian painting embodied a democratic tendency, and yet that is the impression made on me by Giovanni Bellini, Cima, the Bastiani, Basaiti, and--later--Tintoretto. The company of saints appears as a community of equals, sandaled pioneers of a model Republic.

GOD

If you cannot stop doing evil, you must try to forget about God.

To know God and yet do evil, this was the very essence of the romantic life.

I don't believe in God. My belief is nobody believes in God any more except peasants and simple people; the others just pretend to.

I do not believe in God or an afterlife or in the divinity of Christ. But I am aware that Jesus did. He thought he was God's messenger to mankind. I feel that was a tragic mistake.

I do not mind if I lose my soul for all eternity. If the kind of God exists Who would damn me for not working out a deal with Him, then that is unfortunate. I should not care to spend eternity in the company of such a person.

DEATH

The happy ending is a national belief.

The sizzling chop...appalled her, as though it were a foretaste of eternity.

Michael Hollister (2020)

