ANALYSIS

"Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man" (1942)

Mary McCarthy

(1912-1989)

"Miss McCarthy has said that she regards her first book, *The Company She Keeps* (1942), as a novel, although the idea of putting its stories together as a unit did not occur to her until several had been written. The collection is centered about a fictional counterpart of the author who is called Margaret Sargent in all the stories but the first, where the protagonist is a heartless poseur.

In 'Portrait of an [the] Intellectual as a Yale Man' the reader sees Margaret through the eyes of Jim Barnett; in the others she appears more directly as 'I' or 'She' or even 'You.' She has casual love affairs and serious ones; she damns a Stalinist across the dinner table; she works for a swindling art dealer for whom, out of simple fondness, she performs some dubious errands; she is psychoanalyzed and gets the better of her doctor. But the common denominator, excluding the first story, is in Margaret Sargent's dogged persistence in analyzing and testing her every act and motive under moral laws. So long as she has this awareness, she feels that she has life. 'Oh my God,' she prays, leaving her analyst's office, 'do not let them take this away from me. If the flesh must be blind, let the spirit see.' Mary McCarthy's female characters enjoy only in the bleakest fashion the liberties of their emancipated era under the gimlet eye of their own hyperactive consciences. She herself abandoned the consolations of the Catholic faith without gaining the indulgences of atheism....

It must have seemed at the time as if these long short stories, or novellas, were the perfect medium for Miss McCarthy's talent. Jim Barnett, the 'intellectual' Yale man, the self-consciously average (or is it, as the author suggests, anonymous?) American, clean-cut, naive, horribly cheerful, looking happily up at one from an advertised bowl of breakfast cereal, travels in easy, painless, ambling steps from Stalin to Trotsky to Henry Luce where we leave him, prosperous, stout, beginning to drink heavily, and (at last) dissatisfied. Miss McCarthy squeezes out of him all that can possibly be squeezed in her eighty pages; the last drop of his small, sad, mean, uncomprehending soul falls into the final paragraph."

Louis Auchincloss
Pioneers and Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Women Writers
(U Minnesota 1961) 173-74

"'Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man,' Mary McCarthy has explained, 'is not a bit autobiographical, but the heroine appears anyway, in order to make a unity for the book.' John Chamberlain, author of *Farewell to Reform* and *The Enterprising Americans*, served as a model for Jim Barnett, the Yale man. Miss McCarthy attempted in the episode 'to make this real man a broad type. You know, to use John Chamberlain's boyish looks and a few of the features of his career, and then draw all sorts of other Yale men into it.' Chamberlain, however, has denied the generalization implicit in the title...

Margaret Sargent was put into this story, Miss McCarthy adds, 'in an imaginary love affair, which *had* to be because she had to be in the story. I always thought that was all very hard on John Chamberlain, who was married. But of course he knew it wasn't true, and he knew that I didn't know him very well, and that therefore in the story he was just a kind of good-looking clothes-hanger.' This reasoning on the part of Miss McCarthy is peculiar, to say the least, in view of the concern she shows in *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* and in the autobiographical sketches of *The Company She Keeps* for her image in the eyes of others. But John Chamberlain, some twenty years later, does not seem particularly concerned about his portrait: 'Since my own identification with the Left in those days was purely out of a depression-induced pessimism....I have never been able to see myself in Jim Barnett's shoes. I thought socialism was a stomach appeal, and said so. Where Jim Barnett 'sold out,' I merely recovered my optimism--or maybe it was my nerve.'

The portrait of Jim Barnett as intellectual is distinctly unflattering: he is the Average Thinking Man turned Marxist. Not only that, he has a small soul. A middle-of-the-road liberal, he commits himself to no faction. His wife, by looking 'too much like her mother, which was a very bad thing in a girl,' illustrates his basically reactionary nature. It is the old story of the leopard being unable to change his spots. Jim Barnett never renounced his birthright by becoming a liberal, and the spots began to reappear when the pose became tiresome. John Chamberlain has analyzed a 'lack of fundamental seriousness' as the flaw in the character of Jim Barnett that Mary McCarthy found most detestable. And this failure is the key that works this particular character type.

The common denominator, for Miss McCarthy, that makes the Yale man a category is a reluctance to embrace any doctrine wholeheartedly--a fear of systems. In 'Portrait,' the Trotsky issue (on which Jim Barnett sided with Margaret Sargent and which resulted in his leaving the *Liberal*) is a red herring--an excuse for Jim's getting back into the cozy arms of capitalism and not a cause that he championed out of a heart-felt conviction. Once entrenched in the suburbs and secure as a staff writer on a business magazine, he seldom sees Margaret and...'the unsuccessful, opinionated, unknown intellectuals.'

Still, when Jim and Margaret meet at parties, her presence makes him feel the failure of his own life and the limitations of his own nature: 'That single night and day when he had been almost in love with her had taught him everything. He had learned that he must keep down his spiritual expenses--or else go under.' The love affair between Margaret and Jim, otherwise insipid and of little interest, is significant in that it allows the reader to see Margaret Sargent as Jim Barnett sees her or as Miss McCarthy *thinks* Margaret appears to the Yale Man as Intellectual. The characterization that results dramatizes the curious mixture of bravado and uncertainty, intensity and passivity, tension and abandonment that gives Margaret Sargent complexity."

Barbara McKenzie
Mary McCarthy
(Twayne 1966) 81-82

"Meg's final encounter, except for the session with the weak-headed psychiatrist in the last story of the cycle, is with Jim Barnett, the Yale Man of 'Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man.' More than the other characters in the book, Jim is close (in appearance at least) to a real person, the critic and editor John Chamberlain, and yet he is less an exact representation than many of her other characters. Mary McCarthy contends, with perfect sincerity, that she used only John Chamberlain's good looks 'and a few features of his career,' but even Chamberlain himself has on occasion made note, almost fondly, of the identification. Prefacing Chamberlain's review of *The Group*, the *National Review* editor introduces the reviewer as the man that Mary McCarthy was 'having fun with' in her story.

Chamberlain in his own summary study of Mary McCarthy in a volume called *The Creative Present* admits he ought to be galled by the portrait of himself but is not: 'I have never been able to see myself in Jim Barnett's shoes.' Mary McCarthy reiterates the lack of identification and adds that in this story *she* is not Meg. 'It was while I was doing the one about the Yale man that I decided to put the heroine of the earlier stories in that story too. The story of the Yale man is not a bit autobiographical....' The use of a few surface characteristics and a few generalizations in the progress of a career that may well be typical of Yale men who come to New York and go into journalism are the sort of thing she does customarily in the creation of character. Her constructions are bits and snatches of autobiography, remembered details, half of one person, a piece of another. The rest in this case, clearly, is fiction.

If the subject of the earlier stories was the fragmented, individual psyche of I-You-She-Meg-Mary, here it is an objective, social observation: that it is easy for the idealistic, attractive young intellectual to be seduced by success if he abandons his liberalism (not very sturdy to start with) and joins forces with the Establishment. Jim represents, far more than a real person, the onset of Mary McCarthy's generalized study of the intellectual in society, suggested less distinctly in the 'Brooks Brothers' story by Meg's encounter with Mr. Breen. Jim is no Breen to the heroine, not an antagonist but instead, initially, a kindred spirit. The story asserts the author's doubts about the staying power and integrity of the intellectual. Her career-long depiction of the type is to continue through the satire of *The Groves of Academe* and into her study of the

intellectually defective graduates of *The Group* who, because of their education, might be expected, as part of the commonly held cliche, to be intellectuals or to make some pretenses themselves in this direction.

Jim is the hero of this story, Meg merely a camera eye, a recording ear for his progress or lack of it, a listener to his self-doubts. Most of the time Jim is alone with the reader, without even the presence of Meg's eye, and here for the first time in this volume the knowing author tells the story straight without the intervention of Meg's sensibility. From the intellectual point of view Jim represents those young men who played with the radical issues of the Thirties, the kind of man whose convictions were ephemeral, the proper ones at the time, growing out of 'a deficiency of imagination. Jim did not believe that Trotsky could have plotted to murder Stalin or to give the Ukraine to Hitler, because he could not imagine himself or anybody he knew behaving in such a melodramatic and improbable manner.' He brings to his mature life and development thinking all the 'intelligent mediocrity of the Yale man.'

Here the Vassar girl (who later will make the same kind of summary for Vassar's product in general) speaks: 'But at Yale a certain intellectual prodigality had been cultivated in the students; it was bad taste to admire anything too wholeheartedly. They thought 'bad taste' but they meant 'dangerous,' for the prodigality was merely an end product of asceticism: you must not give in to your appetites, physical or spiritual; if you did, God knows where it would land you, in paganism, Romanism, idolatry, or the gutter. Like all good Yale men, Jim feared systems as his great-grandfather had feared the devil, the saloon, and the pope.'

Meg has one brief, sexual encounter with clean-cut, Yale-man-intellectual, married Jim; their business relationship at the *Liberal* office becomes his excuse for not renewing the event. Sternly faithful to her Trotskyite views, Meg is demoted because of the Stalinist convictions of the literary editor and, faced with the prospect of Meg's being fired, Jim walks out as well, presumably to write a book he has been thinking about. His intentions come to nothing, he is hired by a prestigious *Life*-like picture magazine called *Destiny*, which gradually turns him into a seedy, alcoholic, 'professionally bewildered' editor-writer, still somewhat liberal. His Yale-formed mind, good, naive and honest as we saw it in the earlier part of the story, weakens under success. Only when he occasionally comes upon Meg at parties is he aware of the schism between them, and in himself. He keeps her from getting a job on *Destiny*, he tells himself he does not envy her unhappy, poverty-stricken, and free state of failure, and yet he feels a curious regret, a sense that he has lost his own freedom. 'He had never been free, but until he had tried to love the girl, he had not known he was bound...she had showed him the cage of his own nature. He had accommodated himself to it, but he could never forgive her. Through her he had lost his primeval innocence, and he would hate her forever as Adam hates Eve.'

What is this story *about*? Primarily, the tension in the lives of young, educated, privileged liberals of the Thirties between integrity of conviction (which, in Mary McCarthy's eyes sometimes accompanies poverty and failure) and the seductiveness of success which requires of the intellectual an abandonment of the 'true' path. When Meg claims in this story that 'I am not even political,' and then explains her defense of Trotsky as 'he's the most romantic man in modern times,' she is being both pleasantly social to Jim and completely feminine in her desire to strike out at the smugness of the *Liberal's* editors. What she is implying, however, is that her convictions are ethical, not narrowly political, and that she is defending the integrity and courage of the man who did not 'scramble' for position, either morally, socially, or politically, just as, in action, she herself does not scramble for success, and Jim, poor weak Yale man, does.

There is an old-fashioned air about this story because the terms under which Jim and Meg are judged (or judge themselves) are so absolute, so clearly defined. The intellectual puritan in Mary McCarthy, whom we will meet again and again, seems to speak out clearly--and the equation of success with dishonesty, rigid as it is, becomes formularized for the first time here. Even the phraseology is old-fashioned: 'He took her twice' takes one back to the novels of Victorian tradition. Defection from conviction is the major sin, and Jim suffers accordingly. He loses his 'pink cheeks and sparkling brown eyes,' and with the loss of his looks and sobriety, of his 'primal innocence,' he takes his place in the little platoon of McCarthy heroes, fibreless, less-than-adequate accommodaters to the status quo. It might be noted here that many of the liberals in her work and the male hero begin to have a number of characteristics in common: their spinelessness, their lack of honesty, their easy fall from strength and virtue."

Doris Grumbach

The Company She Keeps
(Coward-McCann 1967) 102-06

"This story is mainly about the Yale Man, who, though naive and second rate, has been welcomed onto the Stalinist-dominated weekly magazine the *Liberal* because he comes as a healthy, happy, clean-cut, average American, a type rare among them. This was a time--the thirties--when out of loyalty to the ideal of Communism a large proportion of the intellectual establishment had accepted so many of the lies and brutalities of the Stalin dictatorship that they had lost the sense of the relevance to politics, and even to life, of the ordinary decencies. Such people lied in defense of the Communist party's shifts in policy or vilified the opposition rather than debate with it, and did both with a sincere feeling of virtue. Jim Barnett, the Yale Man, is not one of these' he tries to be honest, but he is able to make a living as a radical political commentator only because his shallowness is precisely suited to the intellectual climate of this milieu, from which the Stalinists have largely excluded reality.

Margaret Sargent was put into this story, says Miss McCarthy, 'because she had to be in it,' that is, for the sake of the unity of the book to come, but her role turns out to be crucial, for she is there as an eruption of integrity into that world of blur and lies. Now when she defends Trotsky, it is among Stalinist editors who can fire her from the magazine job she needs. 'You had to admire her courage,' Jim thinks, 'for undertaking something that cost her so much.' Even her way of taking Jim for a lover is significantly different from her past behavior. She submits to this married man's sudden overpowering lust--and perhaps to her own as well--with a 'disconsolate smile'--no play acting here.

Jim quits his job indignantly when she is fired, and in this time of proud excitement, he gets an idea for an important book. But the effort to write the book and to live on that moral peak is really beyond his means. He gives up both, gets a handsome job on the conservative magazine *Destiny*, and though he continues to send checks to the American Civil Liberties Union, he grows increasingly impatient with opinionated unsuccessful left-wing intellectuals. And for Margaret he comes to feel a kind of hatred. Pathetic though she is in her 'too tense' clinging to her truth, in her unsuccess, she is somehow triumphant. In the story's beautifully written ten last pages she haunts him as a reminder of the dead illusion of his youth, the illusion that he could be free of 'the cage of his own nature' and better than himself."

Irvin Stock
Mary McCarthy
(U Minnesota 1968) 16-18

"In 'Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man,' again, for Margaret, politics and sex are hopelessly entangled. The outburst at Pflaumen's party was an attempt to attract the attention of, and claim kinship with, the Marxist Erdman. In 'Portrait,' political liberalism is one basis of a brief affair. The point of view, indeed, the story, is Jim Barnett's; we see Margaret only as he does. She is introduced to him as 'our gay divorcee' when she is hired by the *Liberal*, the magazine for which Jim writes. As her tea grows cold, she speaks in a 'breathless voice' to a fascinated audience, telling anecdotes about Reno and defending Trotsky. It is our first view of her from outside.

'A troublemaker,' Jim judges her to his wife. 'Too tense,' he thinks, as if she 'lived on excitement, situations, crises, trouble,' speaking up though 'scared stiff.' He sees her lingering at a subway entrance like a girl without a date or appearing as 'the extra girl' at a political dinner (the terrors of spinsterhood again). Her honesty and intensity remind him unpleasantly of his calm and compromised life, of his proper, practical wife and his proper, practical politics.

Jim Barnett has, however, discovered socialism, and he writes about it. Whereas 'most men had come to socialism by some all-too-human compulsion--they were out of work or lonely or sexually unsatisfied,' Jim 'came to socialism freely, from the happy center of things.' His presence on the left lent it respectability, for 'nobody could possibly object to socialism if it were going to run by earnest, undogmatic Yale men.' Jim learned at Yale not to admire anything too 'whole-heartedly,' but to keep himself 'accessible, undecided.'

He is therefore wary of Meg, and he concludes that there must be something wrong with her. But two months later he kisses her in a taxi on the way to a political dinner, and the next night he goes to bed with

her. The affair is completed in two meetings. His 'lust' demands satisfaction and achieves it 'with a zeal...somehow both businesslike and insane.' Afterward he avoids her.

But when Meg announces her support of the Socialist-Labor presidential candidate, Jim, out of a 'sense of chivalry,' announces for the Socialist, Norman Thomas. He cannot be so 'outlandish' as Margaret, but he can descend from the 'far too comfortable' Roosevelt bandwagon and make it a bridge between her and the rest of the staff. He signs a statement demanding a hearing and the right of asylum for Trotsky because of the 'purely sporting question involved--you don't accuse a man without giving him a chance to answer for himself.' To his discomfort, however, Margaret is again being 'intense.'

When he realizes at last that the *Liberal* has 'effectively purged itself of Trotskyism' without taking a public stand, Jim is in a shameful position. He needs a way to 'demonstrate his political seriousness without embroiling himself,' and Margaret's dismissal provides him with a way. He resigns from his job in protest, a gesture neither political nor chivalrous, and plans to write an important Marxist book. But he goes to work for an illustrated popular magazine with a conservative point of view; well paid and successful, he takes pride in never having time for 'his own' work, and he enjoys both success and the sympathy of his friends, who regard his career as a 'tragedy of waste' inflicted on him by his wife's incessant material demands. Margaret's role has been that of the spoiler, the wrecker: she taught him the 'cage of his own nature' by speaking more truth than he cared to hear.

Margaret's impact on Jim is ironic, for we know how she distrusts her motives, how she suspects herself of using politics as a way of getting attention and asserting her superiority; if it is fashionable for liberals to admire Stalin, she cannot be sure that her support of Trotsky is not merely a way going them one better. But looking at her through Jim Barnett's eyes, we see nothing of this. Where their paths have crossed, he has had little awareness of her but uncomfortable awareness of himself. From the great distance of Jim's point of view, the final episode moves abruptly to the intimacy of the analyst's couch."

Willene Schaefer Hardy
Mary McCarthy
(Frederick Ungar 1981) 44-47

"At the end of 'Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man,' the longest, most ambitious story in *The Company She Keeps*, the blithe, vapid Jim Barnett, who has always skimmed across life's surfaces, has lost his former ease and innocence. He had flirted with politics and ideas as he flirted with women. But his brief infatuation with Meg Sargent, who is McCarthy's surrogate in these stories, has disrupted his smooth life, sexually as well as ideologically, and left him badly frightened and 'professionally bewildered,' convincing him 'that he must keep down his spiritual expenses--or else go under.' After the charade of being a serious man, he recoils into his convenient marriage and a convenient job. 'It was self-knowledge [Meg Sargent] had taught him; she had showed him the cage of his own nature. He had accommodated himself to it, but he could never forgive her.'

Here, for once, McCarthy's analytic touch works beautifully. She is essentially a *moraliste*, a dry, lucid anatomist of human nature in the tradition of Montaigne, La Rochefoucauld, and Benjamin Constant, whose great love story *Adolphe* is one of the most acutely analytical novels ever written--about passion, no less. For McCarthy, self-awareness and lucidity, the very things that descend like such a plague on Jim Barnett, are almost absolute values--and as we all know, her prose is astonishing for its clarity and precision. But far from being healing and therapeutic in the style of popular fiction, this bolt of self-knowledge brings us harsh news of our own limitations, the iron cage of personality. For Jim Barnett this news is deadly. 'In some subtle way, Jim had turned into a comfortable man, a man incapable of surprising or being surprised. The hair shirt he wore fitted him snugly now.'

McCarthy's critics might say that the decline of Jim Barnett into a rather seedy alcoholic and sellout reveals less about the intractability of human nature than about her superior attitude toward her characters, especially since it is her own alter ego, Meg Sargent, who shows Jim 'the cage of his own nature.' McCarthy's good friend Dwight Macdonald, who (along with John Chamberlain and Malcolm Cowley) may have been one of the models for Jim Barnett, and who certainly sat for the boisterous and obtuse

Macdougal Macdermott in *The Oasis*, would have been sympathetic to the anti-Stalinist polemic of the 'Yale Man.' But he wondered privately about *The Groves of Academe*: 'Why does she have to be so goddamned snooty, is she god or something?'"

Morris Dickstein
"A Glint of Malice"
Twenty-Four Ways of Looking at Mary McCarthy
(Greenwood 1996) 19-20

"John Chamberlain, the physical model for Jim Barnett, the clean-cut Stalinist poster boy in 'Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man,' had the unenviable task of reviewing the book. Like Jim Barnett, John Chamberlain had a wife and child, a degree from Yale, and a well-known sympathy for left-wing causes. While other Yale men, like Dwight Macdonald and Bill Mangold, had contributed to Jim Barnett's makeup, only Chamberlain was recognizable as the intellectual who made you think of Huckleberry Finn and Boy Scouts. But McCarthy did not leave it at that. In recounting the story of Jim Barnett's brief flirtation with radical politics--a flirtation that ends in bitter self-knowledge--she had him go to bed with his Trotskyist co-worker Meg Sargent and then renounce her in a fashion no Boy Scout would be proud of."

Frances Kiernan
Seeing Mary Plain: A Life of Mary McCarthy
(Norton 2000) 187

Michael Hollister (2020)