

THE ART OF FICTION NO. 27

MARY McCARTHY

The interview took place in the living room of the apartment in Paris where Miss McCarthy was staying during the winter of 1961. It was a sunny, pleasant room, not too large, with long windows facing south toward the new buildings going up along the avenue Montaigne. A dining-cum-writing table stood in an alcove at one end; on it were a lamp, some books and papers, and a rather well-worn portable typewriter. At the other end of the room were several armchairs and a low sofa where Miss McCarthy sat while the interview was recorded. On this early-spring afternoon, the windows were open wide, letting in a warm breeze and the noise of construction work nearby. An enormous pink azalea plant bloomed on the balcony, and roses graced a small desk in one corner.

McCarthy settled down on the sofa and served coffee. She was wearing a simple beige dress with little jewelry—a large and rather ornate ring was her one elaborate ornament. She is a woman of medium height, dark, with straight hair combed back from a center part into a knot at the nape of her neck; this simple coiffure sets off a profile of beautiful, almost classic regularity. Her smile is a generous one, flashing suddenly across her face, crinkling up her wide-set eyes. She speaks not quickly, but with great animation

and energy, gesturing seldom; it is typical of her that she matches the tremendously elegant carriage of her arms and neck and handsomely poised head with a deliberate, almost jerky motion in taking a step.

While McCarthy's conversation was remarkably fluent and articulate, she nevertheless often interrupted herself in order to reword or qualify a phrase, sometimes even impatiently destroying it and starting again in the effort to express herself as exactly as possible. Several times during the interview she seized upon a question in such a way that one felt she had decided upon certain things she wanted to say about herself and would willy-nilly create the opportunity to do so. At other moments, some of them hilarious—her pitiless wit is justifiably celebrated—she would indulge in unpremeditated extravagances of description or speculation that she would then laughingly censor as soon as the words were out of her mouth. She was extremely generous in the matter of silly or badly worded questions, turning them into manageable ones by the nature of her response. In all, her conversation was marked by a scrupulous effort to be absolutely fair and honest, and by a kind of natural and exuberant enjoyment of her own intellectual powers.

—*Elisabeth Sifton, 1961*

INTERVIEWER

Do you like writing in Europe?

MARY MCCARTHY

I don't really find much difference. I think if you stayed here very long, you'd begin to notice a little difficulty about language.

INTERVIEWER

Did you write about Europe when you first came here after the war?

MCCARTHY

Only in that short story, “The Cicerone.” That was in the summer of 1946. We were just about the only tourists because you weren’t allowed to travel unless you had an official reason for it. I got a magazine to give me some sort of *carnet*.

INTERVIEWER

Did the old problem, the American in Europe, interest you as a novelist?

MCCARTHY

I suppose at that time, at least in that story somewhat, it did. But no, not further. For one thing, I don’t know whether I cease to feel so much like an American or what; New York is, after all, so Europeanized, and so many of one’s friends are European, that the distinction between you as an American and the European blurs. Also Europe has become so much more Americanized. No, I no longer see that Jamesian distinction. I mean, I see it in James, and I could see it even in 1946, but I don’t see it anymore. I don’t feel anymore this antithesis of Young America, Old Europe. I think that’s really gone. For better or worse, I’m not sure. Maybe for worse.

INTERVIEWER

What about the novel you’re writing while you’re here—have you been working on it a long time?

MCCARTHY

Oh, years! Let me think, I began it around the time of the first Stevenson campaign. Then I abandoned it and wrote the books on Italy, and *A Charmed Life*, and *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*. When did I begin this thing again? A year ago last spring, I guess. Part of it came out in *Partisan Review*. The one called “Dottie Makes an Honest Woman of Herself.”

INTERVIEWER

Is it unfair to ask you what it will be about?

MCCARTHY

No, it's very easy. It's called *The Group*, and it's about eight Vassar girls. It starts with the inauguration of Roosevelt, and—well, at first it was going to carry them up to the present time, but then I decided to stop at the inauguration of Eisenhower. It was conceived as a kind of mock-chronicle novel. It's a novel about the idea of progress, really. The idea of progress seen in the female sphere, the feminine sphere. You know, home economics, architecture, domestic technology, contraception, childbearing; the study of technology in the home, in the playpen, in the bed. It's supposed to be the history of the loss of faith in progress, in the idea of progress, during that twenty-year period.

INTERVIEWER

Are these eight Vassar girls patterned more or less after ones you knew when you were there in college?

MCCARTHY

Some of them are drawn pretty much from life, and some of them are rather composite. I've tried to keep myself out of this book. Oh, and all their mothers are in it. That's the part I almost like the best.

INTERVIEWER

Just the mothers, not the fathers?

MCCARTHY

Not the fathers. The fathers vaguely figure, offstage and so on, but the mothers are really monumentally present!

INTERVIEWER

Does it matter to you at all where you write?

MCCARTHY

Oh, a nice peaceful place with some good light.

INTERVIEWER

Do you work regularly, every morning, say?

MCCARTHY

Normally; right now I haven't been. Normally I work from about nine to two, and sometimes much longer—if it's going well, sometimes from nine to seven.

INTERVIEWER

Typewriter?

MCCARTHY

Typewriter, yes. This always has to get into a *Paris Review* interview! I very rarely go out to lunch. That's a rule. I've been accepting lunch dates recently—*why* didn't I remember that? My excuse—the excuse I've been forgetting—is simply that I don't go out to lunch! And in general, I don't. That was the best rule I ever made.

INTERVIEWER

Once you've published part of a novel separately, in a magazine or short-story collection, do you do much work on it afterwards, before it is published in the novel itself?

MCCARTHY

It depends. With this novel, I have.

INTERVIEWER

Speaking not of a novel, but of your autobiography, I remember that you published parts of *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* as one section in *Cast a Cold Eye*. You changed the story about your

nickname a great deal, reducing it to just a small incident in *Catholic Girlhood*.

MCCARTHY

I couldn't *bear* that one! It had appeared years ago in *Mademoiselle*, and when I put it in *Cast a Cold Eye*, I didn't realize how much I disliked it. When I came to put *Catholic Girlhood* together, I simply couldn't stand it, and when I was reading the book in proof, I decided to tear it out, to reduce it to a tiny, tiny incident. As it stood, it was just impossible, much too rhetorical.

INTERVIEWER

When you publish chapters of a book separately on their own, do you think of them as chapters, or as independent short stories?

MCCARTHY

As chapters, but if somebody, a magazine editor, thought they were what *Partisan Review* calls a "self-contained chapter," all right, but I've never tried to make them into separate units. If one happens to be, all right—if they want to publish it as such. *The New Yorker* has given me surprises: they've printed things that I would never have thought could stand by themselves. But *they* thought so.

INTERVIEWER

Did you, when you saw them in print?

MCCARTHY

Surprisingly, yes.

INTERVIEWER

What about in your first novel, *The Company She Keeps*?

MCCARTHY

Those chapters were written originally as short stories. About

halfway through, I began to think of them as a kind of unified story. The same character kept reappearing, and so on. I decided finally to call it a novel, in that it does in a sense tell *a* story, one story. But the first chapters were written without any idea of there being a novel. It was when 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, but the heroine appears anyway, in order to make a unity for the book.

INTERVIEWER

Were you also interested simply in the problem of writing one story from various different points of view, in experimenting with the different voices?

MCCARTHY

There were no voices in that. I don't think I was really very much interested in the technical side of it. It was the first piece of fiction I had ever written, I mean I'd never made any experiments before. I was too inexperienced to worry about technical problems.

INTERVIEWER

You hadn't written any fiction before then?

MCCARTHY

No. Well, in college I had written the tiniest amount of fiction: very bad short stories, very unrealized short stories, for courses, and that was all. I once started a detective story to make money—but I couldn't get the murder to take place! At the end of three chapters I was still describing the characters and the milieu, so I thought, this is not going to work. No corpse! And that was all. Then I simply did *The Company She Keeps*, and was only interested in the technical side from the point of view of establishing the truth, of trying to re-create what happened. For instance, the art-gallery story was written in the first person because that's the way you write that kind of story—a study of a curious individual.

INTERVIEWER

You imply that most of the stories were distinctly autobiographical.

MCCARTHY

They all are, more or less, except the one about the Yale man.

INTERVIEWER

Is this distinction between autobiography and fiction clear in your mind before you begin writing a story, or does it become so as you write? Or is there no such distinction?

MCCARTHY

Well, I think it depends on what you're doing. Let's be frank. Take "The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt"; in that case it was an attempt to describe something that really happened—though naturally you have to do a bit of name-changing and city-changing. And the first story, the one about the divorce: that was a stylization—there were no proper names in it or anything—but still, it was an attempt to be as exact as possible about something that had happened. The Yale man was based on a real person. John Chamberlain, actually, whom I didn't know very well. But there it was an attempt 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. Then the heroine was put in, 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. Anything else that I've written later—I may make a mistake—has been, on the whole, a fiction. Though it may have autobiographical elements in it that I'm conscious of, it has been conceived as a fiction, even a thing like *The Oasis*, that's supposed to have all these real people in it. The

who would advise me about budgeting and not letting friends make long-distance calls on my wire. But all that was normal; it was happening to everybody and nobody could feel it as a profound or permanent change, for it was like the life of a college student prolonged; middle-class college students always overspent their allowances and ran up bills that scared them because they couldn't pay.

~~#####~~ The thirties proper, which I was inducted into in about 1936, were something ^{in a way} harsher. They were Armageddon. This panel itself is rather thirtyish. The idea behind it is that we (or you) are sitting in judgment on a period of history. The ^{are} thirties ~~##~~ being presented as a choice. Are you for them or against them, and as you answer, so will you be defined. The rhetorical form that best expresses the thirties is the debate. Today, perhaps, it is the panel, which recognizes the possibility of shades of opinion; in the thirties, the meetings of this sort that I remember ~~#####~~ featured only a pair of antagonists. People used to tell about a debate, so called, at the University of Chicago, when President Hutchins represented Aristotle, Mortimer Adler represented Aquinas, and a student wearing a dunce-cap (yes, literally) represented Hume. Thus the debate shaded into the trial, and in the thirties the weaker member of a pair of debaters found himself, always, on trial. This state of war, of incessant belligerency, was not confined to politics. It infected literature, education, psychiatry, art. The word, reconciliation, which was ^{so} often used at that time, testifies to the state of belligerency. ^{well-known} Certain mediators were always trying to "reconcile" Freud with Marx, ^{as} a little later, ^{was tried to reconcile} Freud with religion. A common form of speech was "How do you reconcile what you say with—?" In practice, there were were some very strange reconciliations. The tiara at the Waldorf strike; the gold evening dress to go to Madrid in the Spanish Civil War. These women were trying to reconcile the ^(unconscious) twenties (fun) with the thirties. There was a strong affinity ⁱⁿ in the thirties for the absurd. Looking back, people remember grotesque and unbelievable events, events that flew, as they say, in the face of Nature. But I will come back to that in a minute.

The thirties are presented now, nostalgically, as a time of freedom. Not so.

whole story is a complete fiction. Nothing of the kind ever happened; after all, it happens in the future. But in general, with characters, I do try at least to be as exact as possible about the essence of a person, to find the key that works the person both in real life and in the fiction.

INTERVIEWER

Do you object to people playing the roman à clef game with your novels?

MCCARTHY

I suppose I really ask for it, in a way. I *do* rather object to it at the same time, insofar as it deflects attention from what I'm trying to do in the novel. What I really do is take real plums and put them in an imaginary cake. If you're interested in the cake, you get rather annoyed with people saying what species the real plum was. In *The Groves of Academe*, for instance. I had taught at Bard College and at Sarah Lawrence, but I didn't want to make a composite of those two places: I really wanted to make a weird imaginary college of my own. I even took a trip to the Mennonite country in Pennsylvania to try to find a perfect location for it, which I found—now, where was it? Somewhere near Ephrata—yes, it was Lititz, Pennsylvania, the home of the pretzel. There's a very charming old-fashioned sort of academy, a girls' college there—I'd never heard of it before and can't remember the name. It had the perfect setting, I thought, for this imaginary college of mine. Anyway, I would get terribly annoyed if people said it had to do with Sarah Lawrence, which it had almost no resemblance to. It was quite a bit like Bard. Sarah Lawrence is a much more *borné* and dull place than Bard, or than my college. And of course I was even more annoyed if they said it was Bennington. There was not supposed to be anything there of Bennington at all!

INTERVIEWER

When were you at Bard?

MCCARTHY

'45 to '46.

INTERVIEWER

And at Sarah Lawrence?

MCCARTHY

I was there just for one term, the winter of '48.

INTERVIEWER

Did you enjoy teaching?

MCCARTHY

I adored teaching at Bard, yes. But the students were so poor at Sarah Lawrence that I didn't much enjoy it there. I don't think anyone I knew who was teaching there then did. But at Bard it was very exciting. It was all quite mad, crazy. I had never taught before, and I was staying up till two in the morning every night trying to keep a little bit behind my class. Joke.

INTERVIEWER

Did they ask you to teach "creative writing"?

MCCARTHY

I've always refused to teach creative writing. Oh, I had in addition to two courses, about seven or eight tutorials, and some of those tutees wanted to study creative writing. I think I finally weakened and let one boy who was utterly ungifted for it study creative writing because he was so incapable of studying anything else.

INTERVIEWER

But mostly it was these two courses.

MCCARTHY

Yes, and then you had to keep up with all these students. I had one boy doing all the works of James T. Farrell and a girl who was studying Marcus Aurelius and Dante. That was fun. That one I did the work for. And one girl was doing a thesis on Richardson; that was just hopeless. I mean, I couldn't even try to keep up with teaching Russian novels, and, say, Jane Austen—who in my course came under the head of Modern Novel—and all the works of Richardson. So I could never tell, you know, whether she had read what she was supposed to have read, because I couldn't remember it! Everything was reversed! The student was in a position to see whether the professor was cheating, or had done her homework. Anyway, everybody ended up ill after this year—you know, various physical ailments. But it was exciting, it was fun. The students were fun. The bright ones were bright, and there wasn't much of a middle layer. They were either bright or they were just cretins. I must say, there are times when you welcome a B student.

I liked teaching because I loved this business of studying. I found it quite impossible to give a course unless I'd read the material the night before. I absolutely couldn't handle the material unless it was fresh in my mind. Unless you give canned lectures, it really has to be—though that leads, I think, to all sorts of very whimsical, perhaps, and capricious interpretations; that is, you see the whole book, say *Anna Karenina*, in terms that are perhaps dictated by the moment. One wonders afterwards whether one's interpretation of *Anna Karenina* that one had rammed down the throats of those poor students was really as true as it seemed to one at the time.

INTERVIEWER

Which books did you teach in the Modern Novel?

MCCARTHY

Well, you had to call everything at Bard either modern or contemporary, or the students wouldn't register for it. Everyone thinks this a joke, but it was true. I originally was going to teach a

whole course on critical theory, from Aristotle to T.S. Eliot or something, and only three students registered for it, but if it had been called Contemporary Criticism, then I think we would have had a regular class. So we called this course the Modern Novel, and it began with Jane Austen, I think, and went up, well, certainly to Henry James. That was when I taught novels in pairs. I taught *Emma* and *Madame Bovary* together. Then *The Princess Casamassima*, with the anarchist plot in it and everything, with *The Possessed*. *The Red and the Black* with *Great Expectations*. And *Fontamara* with something. I only taught novels I liked.

INTERVIEWER

Would it be roughly the same list, were you teaching the course now? Or do you have new favorites?

MCCARTHY

Oh I don't know, I might even add something like *Doctor Zhivago* at the end. I would probably do some different Dickens. I've read an awful lot of Dickens over again since then. Now I think I'd teach *Our Mutual Friend* or *Little Dorrit*.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you start reading Dickens over again?

MCCARTHY

I don't know, I got interested in Dickens at Bard, and then at Sarah Lawrence. Another stimulus was a book done by a man called Edgar Johnson, a biographer of Dickens. Anthony West had attacked it in *The New Yorker*, and this made me so angry that I reviewed the book, and that set off another kind of chain reaction. I really *passionately* admire Dickens.

INTERVIEWER

Could I go back for a moment to what you said about your early writing at college? I think you said that *The Company She*

Keeps was the first fiction you ever wrote, but that was some years after you left Vassar, wasn't it?

MCCARTHY

Oh, yes. You know, I had been terribly discouraged when I was at Vassar, and later, by being told that I was really a critical mind, and that I had no creative talent. Who knows? They may have been right. This was done in a generous spirit, I don't mean that it was harsh. Anyway, I hadn't found any way at all, when I was in college, of expressing anything in the form of short stories. We had a rebel literary magazine that Elizabeth Bishop and Eleanor Clark were on, and Muriel Rukeyser and I. I wrote, not fiction, but sort of strange things for this publication.

INTERVIEWER

A rebel magazine?

MCCARTHY

There was an official literary magazine, which we were all against. Our magazine was anonymous. It was called *Con Spirito*. It caused a great sort of scandal. I don't know why—it was one of these perfectly innocent undertakings. But people said, "How awful, it's anonymous." The idea of anonymity was of course to keep the judgment clear, especially the editorial board's judgment—to make people read these things absolutely on their merits. Well, anyway, *Con Spirito* lasted for only a few numbers. Elizabeth Bishop wrote a wonderful story for it which I still remember, called "Then Came the Poor." It was about a revolution, a fantasy that took place in modern bourgeois society, when the poor invade, and take over a house.

INTERVIEWER

When you left Vassar, what then?

MCCARTHY

Well, I went to New York, and I began reviewing for *The New Republic* and *The Nation*—right away. I wrote these little book reviews. Then there was a series about the critics. *The Nation* wanted a large-scale attack on critics and book reviewers, chiefly those in the *Herald Tribune*, the *Times*, and the *Saturday Review* and so on. I had been doing some rather harsh reviews, so they chose me as the person to do this. But I was so young—I think I was twenty-two—that they didn't *trust* me. So they got Margaret Marshall, who was the assistant literary editor then, to do it with me: actually we divided the work up and did separate pieces. But she was older and was supposed to be—I don't know—a restraining influence on me; anyway, someone more responsible. That series was a great sensation at the time, and it made people very mad. I continued just to do book reviews, maybe one other piece about the theater, something like the one on the literary critics. And then nothing more until *Partisan Review* started. That was when I tried to write the detective story—before *Partisan Review*. 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, got a backer, merged with some other people—Dwight Macdonald and others—and started it again. As an anti-Stalinist magazine. I had been married to an actor, and was supposed to know something about the theater, so I began writing a theater column for them. I didn't have any other ambitions at all. Then I married Edmund Wilson, and after we'd been married about a week, he 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*. Robert Penn Warren published it in the *Southern Review*. And I found myself writing fiction, to my great surprise.

INTERVIEWER

This was when you became involved in politics, wasn't it?

MCCARTHY

No. Earlier. In 1936, at the time of the Moscow trials. That changed absolutely everything. I got swept into the whole Trotskyite movement. But by accident. I was at a party. I knew Jim Farrell—I'd reviewed one of his books, I think it was *Studs Lonigan*—in any case, I knew Jim Farrell, and I was asked to a party given by his publisher for Art Young, the old *Masses* cartoonist. There were a lot of communists at this party. Anyway, Farrell went around asking people whether they thought Trotsky was entitled to a hearing and to the right of asylum. I said yes, and that was all. The next thing I discovered I was on the letterhead of something calling itself the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky. I was furious, of course, at this use of my name. Not that my name had any consequence, but still, it was mine. Just as I was about to make some sort of protest, I began to get all sorts of calls from Stalinists, telling me to get off the committee. I began to see that other people were falling off the committee, like Freda Kirchwey—she was the first to go, I think—and this cowardice impressed me so unfavorably that naturally I didn't say anything about my name having got on there by accident, or at least without my realizing. So I stayed.

I began to know all the people on the committee. We'd attend meetings. It was a completely different world. Serious, you know. Anyway, that's how I got to know the PR boys. They hadn't yet revived the *Partisan Review*, but they were both on the Trotsky committee, at least Philip was. We—the committee, that is—used to meet in Farrell's apartment. I remember once when we met on St. Valentine's Day and I thought, Oh, this is so strange, because I'm the only person in this room who realizes that it's Valentine's Day. It was true! I had a lot of rather rich Stalinist friends, and I was always on the defensive with them, about the Moscow trial question, Trotsky and so on. So I had to inform myself, really, in

order to conduct the argument. I found that I was reading more and more, getting more and more involved in this business. At the same time I got a job at Covici-Friede, a rather left-wing publishing house now out of business, also full of Stalinists. I began to see Philip Rahv again because Covici Friede needed some readers' opinions on Russian books, and I remembered that he read Russian, so he came around to the office, and we began to see each other. When *Partisan Review* was revived I appeared as a sort of fifth wheel—there may have been more than that—but in any case as a kind of appendage of *Partisan Review*.

INTERVIEWER

Then you hadn't really been interested in politics before the Moscow trials?

MCCARTHY

No, not really. 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. We used to see each other, and there were a lot of jokes. I even marched in May Day parades. Things like that. But it was all . . . fun. It was all done in that spirit. And I remained, as the *Partisan Review* boys said, absolutely bourgeois throughout. They always said to me very sternly, "You're really a throwback. You're really a twenties figure."

INTERVIEWER

How did you react to that?

MCCARTHY

Well, I suppose I was wounded. I was a sort of gay, good-time girl, from their point of view. And they were men of the thirties. Very serious. That's why my position was so insecure on *Partisan Review*; it wasn't exactly insecure, but . . . lowly. I mean, in *fact*.

And that was why they let me write about the theater, because they thought the theater was of absolutely no consequence.

INTERVIEWER

How did the outbreak of the war affect your political opinion? The *Partisan Review* group split apart, didn't it?

MCCARTHY

At the beginning of the war we were all isolationists, the whole group. Then I think the summer after the fall of France—certainly before Pearl Harbor—Philip Rahv wrote an article in which he said in a measured sentence, “In a certain sense, this is our war.” The rest of us were deeply shocked by this, because we regarded it as a useless imperialist war. You couldn't beat Fascism that way: “Fight the enemy at home,” and so on. In other words, we reacted to the war rather in the manner as if it had been World War I. This was after Munich, after the so-called phony war. There was some reason for having certain doubts about the war, at least about the efficacy of the war. So when Philip wrote this article, a long controversy began on *Partisan Review*. It split between those who supported the war, and those who didn't. I was among those who didn't—Edmund Wilson also, though for slightly different reasons. Dwight Macdonald and Clement Greenberg split off, and Dwight founded his own magazine, *Politics*, which started out as a Trotskyite magazine, and then became a libertarian, semi-anarchist one. Meyer Shapiro was in this group, and I forget who else. Edmund was really an unreconstructed isolationist. The others were either Marxist or libertarian. Of course there was a split in the Trotskyite movement at that period.

Toward the end of the war I began to realize that there was something hypocritical about my position—that I was really supporting the war. I'd go to a movie—there was a marvelous documentary called *Desert Victory* about the British victory over Rommel's Afrika Korps—and I'd find myself weeping madly when

Montgomery's bagpipers went through to El Alamein. In other words, cheering the war, and on the other hand, being absolutely against Bundles for Britain, against Lend-Lease—this was after Lend-Lease, of course—against every practical thing. And suddenly, I remember—it must have been the summer of '45 that I first said this aloud—I remember it was on the Cape, at Truro. There were a lot of friends, Chiaromonte, Lionel Abel, Dwight, et cetera, at my house—by this time I was divorced from Edmund, or separated, anyway. And I said, “You know, I think I, and all of us, are really *for* the war.” This was the first time this had been said aloud by me. Dwight indignantly denied it. “I’m *not* for the war!” he said. But he was. Then I decided I wanted to give a blood transfusion. And I practically had to get cleared! Now no one was making me do this, but I felt I had to go and get cleared by my friends first. Was it wrong of me to support the war effort by giving blood? It was agreed that it was all right. All this *fuss!* So I gave blood, just once. Some other people were doing it too, I believe, independently, at the same time, people of more or less this tendency. That is the end of that story.

Years later, I realized I really thought that Philip had been right, and that the rest of us had been wrong. Of course we didn't know about the concentration camps: the death camps hadn't started at the beginning. All that news came in fairly late. But once this news was in, it became clear—at least to me, and I still believe it—that the only way to have stopped it was in a military way. That only the military defeat of Hitler could stop this, and it had to be stopped. But it took a long, long time to come to this view. You're always afraid of making the same mistake over again. But the trouble is you can always correct an earlier mistake like our taking the attitude to World War II as if it were World War I, but if you ever try to project the correction of a mistake into the future, you may make a different one. That is, many people now are talking about World War III as if it were World War II.

INTERVIEWER

What I don't see, though, is how all this left you once the war was over.

MCCARTHY

Actually, as I remember, after the war was the very best period, politically, that I've been through. At that time, it seemed to me there was a lot of hope around. The war was over! Certain—perhaps—mistakes had been recognized. The bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima, and there was a kind of general repentance of this fact. This was before the hydrogen bomb; and we never even dreamed that the Russians were going to get the atomic bomb. The political scene looked free. This was not only true for us—it seemed a good moment. At least there was still the hope of small libertarian movements. People like Dwight and Chiaromonte and I used to talk about it a great deal, and even Koestler was writing at that period about the possibility of founding oases—that's where I took the title of that book from. It seemed possible still, utopian but possible, to change the world on a small scale. Everyone was trying to live in a very principled way, but with quite a lot of energy, the energy that peace had brought, really. This was the period of the Marshall Plan, too. It was a good period. Then of course the Russians got the atom bomb, and the hydrogen bomb came. That was the end of *any* hope, or at least any hope that I can see of anything being done except in a massive way.

INTERVIEWER

How do you characterize your political opinion now?

MCCARTHY

Dissident!

INTERVIEWER

All the way round?

MCCARTHY

Yes! No, I still believe in what I believed in then—I still believe in a kind of libertarian socialism, a decentralized socialism. But I don't see any possibility of achieving it. That is, within the span that I can see, which would be, say, to the end of my son's generation, your generation. It really seems to me sometimes that the only hope is space. That is to say, perhaps the most energetic—in a bad sense—elements will move on to a new world in space. The problems of mass society will be transported into space, leaving behind this world as a kind of Europe, which then eventually tourists will visit. The Old World. I'm only half joking. I don't think that the problem of social equality has ever been solved. As soon as it looks as if it were going to be solved, or even as if it were going to be confronted—say, as at the end of the eighteenth century—there's a mass move to a new continent which defers this solution. After '48, after the failure of the '48 revolutions in Europe, hope for an egalitarian Europe really died, and the forty-eighters, many of them, went to California in the Gold Rush as forty-niners. My great-grandfather, from central Europe, was one of them. The Gold Rush, the Frontier was a substitute sort of equality. Think of Chaplin's film. And yet once the concept of equality had entered the world, life becomes intolerable without it; yet life continues without its being realized. So it may be that there will be another displacement, another migration. The problem, the solution, or the confrontation, will again be postponed.

INTERVIEWER

Do you find that your critical work, whether it's political or literary, creates any problems in relation to your work as a novelist?

MCCARTHY

No, except that you have the perpetual problem, if somebody asks you to do a review, whether to interrupt what you're writing—if you're writing a novel—to do the review. You have to weigh whether the subject interests you enough, or whether you're tired

at that moment, emotionally played out by the fiction you're writing. Whether it would be a good thing to stop and concentrate on something else. I just agreed to and did a review of Camus's collected fiction and journalism. That *was* in some way connected with my own work, with the question of the novel in general. I thought, yes, I will do this because I want to read all of Camus and decide what I think about him finally. (Actually, I ended up almost as baffled as when I started.) But in general, I don't take a review unless it's something like that. Or unless Anthony West attacks Dickens. You know. Either it has to be some sort of thing that I want very much to take sides on, or something I'd like to study a bit, that I want to find out about anyway. Or where there may, in the case of study, be some reference—very indirect—back to my own work.

INTERVIEWER

This is quite a change from the time when you wrote criticism and never even thought of writing fiction. But now you consider yourself a novelist? Or don't you bother with these distinctions?

MCCARTHY

Well, I suppose I consider myself a novelist. Yes. Still, whatever way I write was really, I suppose, formed critically. That is, I learned to write reviews and criticism and then write novels, so that however I wrote, it was formed that way. George Eliot, you know, began by translating Strauss, began by writing about German philosophy—though her philosophic passages are not at all good in *Middlemarch*. Nevertheless, I *think* that this kind of training really makes one more interested in the subject than in the style. Her work certainly doesn't suffer from any kind of stylistic frippery. There's certainly no voluminous drapery around. There is a kind of concision in it, at her best—that passage where she's describing the character of Lydgate—which shows, I think, the critical and philosophic training. I've never liked the conventional conception of "style." What's confusing is that style usually means

some form of fancy writing—when people say, oh yes, so and so’s such a “wonderful stylist.” But if one means by style the voice, the irreducible and always recognizable and alive thing, then of course style is really everything. It’s what you find in Stendhal, it’s what you find in Pasternak. The same thing you find in a poet—the sound of, say, Donne’s voice. In a sense, you can’t go further in an analysis of Donne than to be able to place this voice, in the sense that you recognize Don Giovanni by the voice of Don Giovanni.

INTERVIEWER

In speaking of your own writing, anyway, you attribute its “style” to your earlier critical work—then you don’t feel the influence of other writers of fiction?

MCCARTHY

I don’t think I have any influences. I think my first story, the first one in *The Company She Keeps*, definitely shows the Jamesian influence—James is so terribly catching. But beyond that, I can’t find any influence. That is, I can’t as a detached person—as detached as I can be—look at my work and see where it came from, from the point of view of literary sources.

INTERVIEWER

There must be certain writers, though, that you are *drawn* to more than others.

MCCARTHY

Oh, yes! But I don’t think I write like them. The writer I really like best is Tolstoy, and I *know* I don’t write like Tolstoy. I wish I did! Perhaps the best English prose is Thomas Nashe. I don’t write at all like Thomas Nashe.

INTERVIEWER

It would seem also, from hints you give us in your books, that you like Roman writers as well.

MCCARTHY

I did when I was young, very much. At least, I adored Catullus, and Juvenal; those were the two I really passionately loved. And Caesar, when I was a girl. But you couldn't say that I had been influenced by Catullus! No! And Stendhal I like very, very much. Again, I would be happy to write like Stendhal, but I don't. There are certain sentences in Stendhal that come to mind as how to do it if one could. I can't. A certain kind of clarity and brevity—the author's attitude summed up in a sentence, and done so simply, done without patronizing. Some sort of joy.

INTERVIEWER

It's a dangerous game to play, the influence one.

MCCARTHY

Well, in some cases it's easy to see, and people themselves acknowledge it, and are interested in it, as people are interested in their genealogy. I simply can't find my ancestors. I was talking to somebody about John Updike, and he's another one I would say I can't find any sources for.

INTERVIEWER

Do you like his writing?

MCCARTHY

Yes. I've not quite finished *Rabbit, Run*—I must get it back from the person I lent it to and finish it. I thought it was very good, and so stupidly reviewed. I'd read *The Poorhouse Fair*, which I thought was really remarkable. Perhaps it suffered from the point-of-view problem, the whole virtuosity of doing it through the eyes of this old man sitting on the veranda of the poorhouse, through his eyes with their refraction, very old eyes, and so on. I think, in a way, this trick prevents him saying a good deal in the book. Nevertheless, it's quite a remarkable book. But anyway, I nearly didn't read *Rabbit, Run* because I thought, Oh my God!

from reading those reviews. The reviewers seemed to be under the impression that the hero was a terrible character. It's incredible! No, I think it's the most interesting American novel I've read in quite a long time.

INTERVIEWER

What about others? Did you like *Henderson the Rain King*?

MCCARTHY

Well, yes, the first part of *Henderson* I think is marvelous. The vitality! I still think it's an amusing novel right through the lions, almost like a French eighteenth-century novel, or *conte*, very charming. But it doesn't have this tremendous blast of vitality that the first part has, and it doesn't have the density.

INTERVIEWER

What other recent American novels have you been interested by?

MCCARTHY

Well, name one. There really aren't any! I mean, are there? I can't think of any. I don't like Salinger, not at all. That last thing isn't a novel anyway, whatever it is. I don't like it. Not at all. It suffers from this terrible sort of metropolitan sentimentality and it's so narcissistic. And to me, also, it seemed so false, so calculated. Combining the plain man with an absolutely megalomaniac egoism. I simply can't stand it.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think of women writers, or do you think the category "woman writer" should not be made?

MCCARTHY

Some women writers make it. I mean, there's a certain kind of woman writer who's a capital W, capital W. Virginia Woolf certainly was one, and Katherine Mansfield was one, and Elizabeth Bowen

is one. Katherine Anne Porter? Don't think she really is—I mean, her writing is certainly very feminine, but I would say that there wasn't this “WW” business in Katherine Anne Porter. Who else? There's Eudora Welty, who's certainly not a “Woman Writer.” Though she's become one lately.

INTERVIEWER

What is it that happens to make this change?

MCCARTHY

I think they become interested in décor. You notice the change in Elizabeth Bowen. Her early work is much more masculine. Her later work has much more drapery in it. Who else? Jane Austen was never a “woman writer,” I don't think. The cult of Jane Austen pretends that she was, but I don't think she was. George Eliot *certainly* wasn't, and George Eliot is the kind of woman writer I admire. I was going to write a piece at some point about this called “Sense and Sensibility,” dividing women writers into these two. I *am* for the ones who represent sense, and so was Jane Austen.

INTERVIEWER

Getting away from novels for a moment, I'd like to ask you about *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* if I might. Will you write any more autobiography?

MCCARTHY

I was just reading—oh God, actually I *was* just starting to read Simone de Beauvoir's second volume, *La Force de l'âge*, and she announces in the preface that she can't write about her later self with the same candor that she wrote about her girlhood.

INTERVIEWER

You feel that too?

MCCARTHY

On this one point I agree with her. One has to be really old, I think, really quite an old person—and by that time I don't know what sort of shape one's memory would be in.

INTERVIEWER

You don't agree with her on other points?

MCCARTHY

I had an interview with *L'Express* the other day, and I gave Simone de Beauvoir the works. Let's not do it twice. I think she's pathetic, that's all. This book is supposed to be better, more interesting anyway, than the first one because it's about the thirties, and everyone wants to read about the thirties. And her love affair with Sartre, which is just about the whole substance of this book, is supposed to be very touching. The book is more interesting than the first one. But I think she's odious. A mind totally bourgeois turned inside out.

INTERVIEWER

I have something else to ask, apropos of *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*. There are certain points, important points and moments in your novels, where you deepen or enlarge the description of the predicament in which a character may be by reference to a liturgical or ecclesiastical or theological parallel or equivalence. What I want to know is, is this simply a strict use of analogy, a technical literary device, or does it indicate any conviction that these are valid and important ways of judging a human being?

MCCARTHY

I suppose it's a reference to a way of thinking about a human being. But I think at their worst they're rather just literary references. That is, slightly show-off literary references. I have a terrible compulsion to make them—really a dreadful compulsion. The first sentence of *The Stones of Florence* begins, "How can you stand it?"

This is the first thing, and the last thing, the eschatological question that the visitor leaves echoing in the air behind him.” Something of that sort. Well, everybody was after me to take out that word. I left it out when I published that chapter in *The New Yorker*, but I put it back in the book. No, I do have this great compulsion to make those references. I think I do it as a sort of secret signal, a sort of looking over the heads of the readers who don’t recognize them to the readers who do understand them.

INTERVIEWER

If these references *are* only literary ones, secret signals, then they are blasphemous.

MCCARTHY

Yes, I see what you mean. I suppose they are. Yes, they are secret jokes, they are blasphemies. But—I think I said something of this in the introduction of *Catholic Girlhood*—I think that religion offers to Americans (I mean the Roman Catholic religion) very often the only history and philosophy they ever get. A reference to it somehow opens up that historical vista. In that sense it is a device for deepening the passage.

INTERVIEWER

Could we go back to your novels for a moment? I’d like to ask you about how you begin on them. Do you start with the characters, the situation, the plot? What comes first? Perhaps that’s too hard a question, too general.

MCCARTHY

Very hard, and I’m awfully specific. I can really only think in specific terms, at least about myself. *The Groves of Academe* started with the plot. The plot and this figure: there can’t be the plot without this figure of the impossible individual, the unemployable professor and his campaign for justice. Justice, both in quotes, you know, and serious in a way. What *is* justice for the unemployable

person? That was conceived from the beginning as a plot: the whole idea of the reversal at the end, when Mulcahy is triumphant and the president is about to lose his job or quit, when the worm turns and is triumphant. I didn't see exactly what would happen in between; the more minute details weren't worked out. But I did see that there would be his campaign for reinstatement and then his secret would be discovered. In this case that he had *not* been a communist. *A Charmed Life* began with a short story; the first chapter was written as a short story. When I conceived the idea of its being a novel, I think about all I knew was that the heroine would have to die in the end. Everybody objected to that ending, and said that it was terrible to have her killed in an automobile accident in the last paragraph—utterly unprepared for, and so on. But the one thing I knew absolutely certainly was that the heroine had to die in the end. At first I was going to have her have an abortion, and have her die in the abortion. But that seemed to me so trite. Then I conceived the idea of having her drive on the correct side of the road and get killed, because in this weird place everyone is always on the wrong side of the road. But all that is really implicit in the first chapter.

INTERVIEWER

So the charge that readers are unprepared for the last paragraph you feel is unfair?

MCCARTHY

There may be something wrong with the novel, I don't know. But it was always supposed to have a fairy-tale element in it. New Leeds is *haunted!* Therefore nobody should be surprised if something unexpected happens, or something catastrophic, for the place is also pregnant with catastrophe. But it may be that the treatment in between was too realistic, so that the reader was led to expect a realistic continuation of everything going on in a rather moderate way. It was, to some extent, a symbolic story. The novel is supposed to be about doubt. All the characters in different ways

represent doubt, whether it is philosophical or ontological doubt as in the case of the strange painter who questions everything—“Why don’t I murder my grandmother?” and so on. Or the girl’s rather nineteenth-century self-doubt, doubt of the truth, of what she perceives. In any case, everyone is supposed to represent one or another form of doubt. When the girl finally admits to herself that she’s pregnant, and also recognizes that she must do something about it, in other words, that she has to put up a real stake—and she does put up a real stake—at that moment she becomes mortal. All the other characters are immortal. They have dozens of terrible accidents, and they’re all crippled in one way or another, and yet they have this marvelous power of survival. All those drunks and human odds and ends. Anyway, the girl makes the decision—which from the point of view of conventional morality is a wicked decision—to have an abortion, to kill life. Once she makes this decision, she becomes mortal, and doesn’t belong to the charmed circle anymore. As soon as she makes it, she gets killed—to get killed is simply a symbol of the fact that she’s mortal.

INTERVIEWER

You say that her decision makes her mortal. But her decision has also included someone else, the painter.

MCCARTHY

Yes, yes. I see what you mean. I hadn’t thought of that, that when she asks somebody to help her it implies some sort of social bond, some sort of mutual bond between people in society, while the rest of these people are still a community of isolates.

INTERVIEWER

His joining her in this mortal, social bond, that doesn’t make him mortal as well? He is still a part of the charmed circle?

MCCARTHY

He’s too sweet to be mortal! Well, he’s a comic figure, and

I have this belief that all comic characters are immortal. They're eternal. I believe this is Bergson's theory too. He has something, I'm told, about comic characters being *figé*. Like Mr. and Mrs. Micawber: they all have to go on forever and be invulnerable. Almost all Dickens's characters have this peculiar existence of eternity, except the heroes, except Pip, or Nicholas Nickleby, or David Copperfield.

INTERVIEWER

What other characters in your novels do you consider—

MCCARTHY

The comic ones? Who knows whether they're immortal! As far as I'm concerned, they're immortal!

INTERVIEWER

Then you haven't thought of this distinction between "mortal" and "immortal" in relation to characters in other of your novels besides *A Charmed Life*?

MCCARTHY

I didn't think of this distinction until just recently, and not in connection with myself. It's just at this very moment—*now* talking with you—that I'm thinking of it in connection with myself. I would say that it is a law that applies to *all* novels: that the comic characters are *figé*, are immortal, and that the hero or heroine exists in time, because the hero or heroine is always in some sense equipped with purpose.

The man in *The Groves of Academe*. Well, he's immortal, yes. He is a comic villain, and villains too always—I think—partake in this comic immortality. I *think* so. I'm not sure that you couldn't find an example, though, of a villain it wasn't true of. In Dickens again. In the late novels, somebody like Bradley Headstone, the schoolmaster, he's a mixed case. He's certainly not a villain in the sense of, say, the villain in *Little Dorrit*, who belongs to the

old-fashioned melodramatic immortal type of villain. Headstone is really half a hero, Steerforth is half a hero, and therefore they don't conform to this. This all came to me last year, this distinction, when I was thinking about the novel. Not my novel: *The Novel*.

But maybe that's really part of the trouble I'm having with *my* novel! These girls are all essentially comic figures, and it's awfully hard to make anything happen to them. Maybe this is really the trouble! Maybe I'm going to find out something in this interview! That the whole problem is *time!* I mean for me, in this novel. The passage of time, to show development. I think maybe my trouble is that these girls are comic figures, and that therefore they really can't develop! You see what I mean? They're not all so terribly comic, but most of them are. How're they ever going to progress through the twenty years between the inauguration of Roosevelt and the inauguration of Eisenhower? This has been the great problem, and here I haven't had a form for it. I mean, all I know is that they're supposed to be middle-aged at the end.

Yes, I think maybe that *is* the trouble. One possibility would be . . . I've been introducing them one by one, chapter by chapter. They all appear at the beginning, you know, like the beginning of an opera, or a musical comedy. And then I take them one by one, chapter by chapter. I have been bringing each one on a little later on in time. But perhaps I can make bigger and bigger jumps so that you could meet, say, the last one when she is already middle-aged. You see what I mean. Maybe this would solve the problem. One five years later, another eight years later, and so on. I could manage the time problem that way. This has been very fruitful! Thank you!

INTERVIEWER

I want to ask you about the problem of time in the novel. You have written that a novel's action cannot take place in the future. But you have said that the action described in *The Oasis* all takes place in the future.

MCCARTHY

The Oasis is not a novel. I don't classify it as such. It was terribly criticized, you know, on that ground; people objected, said it wasn't a novel. But I never meant it to be. It's a *conte*, a *conte philosophique*.

INTERVIEWER

And *A Charmed Life* you say has fairy-tale elements.

MCCARTHY

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 swoop. *A Charmed Life*, for instance. You know, at the beginning I make a sort of inventory of all the town characters, just telling who they are. Now I did this with the intention of describing, well, this nice, ordinary, old-fashioned New England town. But it ended up differently. Something is distorted, the description takes on a sort of extravagance—I don't know exactly how it happens. I know I don't mean it to happen.

INTERVIEWER

You say in one of your articles that perhaps the fault lies simply in the material which the modern world affords, that it itself lacks—

MCCARTHY

Credibility? Yes. It's a difficulty I think all modern writers have.

INTERVIEWER

Other than the problem of arrangement of time, are there other specific technical difficulties about the novel you find yourself particularly concerned with?

MCCARTHY

Well, the whole question of the point of view, which tortures everybody. It's the problem that everybody's been up against since Joyce, if not before. Of course James really began it, and Flaubert even. You find it as early as *Madame Bovary*. The problem of the point of view, and the voice: *style indirect libre*—the author's voice, by a kind of ventriloquism, disappearing in and completely limited by the voices of his characters. What it has meant is the complete banishment of the author. I would like to restore the author! I haven't tried yet, but I'd like to try after this book, which is as far as I can go in ventriloquism. 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. It's just that a certain kind of intelligence—I'm not only speaking of myself, but of anybody, Saul Bellow, for example—is more or less absent from the novel, and has to be, in accordance with these laws which the novel has made for itself. I think one reason that everyone—at least I—welcomed *Doctor Zhivago* was that you had the author in the form of the hero. And this beautiful tenor voice, the hero's voice and the author's—this marvelous voice, and this clear sound of intelligence. The Russians have never gone through the whole development of the novel you find in Joyce, Faulkner, et cetera, so that Pasternak was slightly unaware of the problem! But I think this technical development has become absolutely killing to the novel.

INTERVIEWER

You say that after this novel about the Vassar girls, you—

MCCARTHY

I don't know what I'm going to do, but I want to try something that will introduce, at least back into my work, my own voice. And not in the disguise of a heroine. I'm awfully sick of my heroine.

I don't mean in this novel: my heroine of the past. Because the sensibility in each novel got more and more localized with this heroine, who became an agent of perception, et cetera.

Let me make a jump now. The reason that I enjoyed doing those books on Italy, the Venice and Florence books, was that I was writing *in my own voice*. One book was in the first person, and one was completely objective, but it doesn't make any difference. I felt, you know, now I can talk freely! The books were written very fast, the Venice one faster. Even the Florence book, with masses of research in it, was written very fast, with a great deal of energy, with a kind of liberated energy. And without the peculiar kind of painstakingness that's involved in the dramatization that one does in a novel—that is, when nothing can come in that hasn't been perceived through a character. The technical difficulties are so great, in projecting yourself, in feigning an alien consciousness, that too much energy gets lost, I think, in the masquerade. And I think this is not only true of me.

INTERVIEWER

How did you come to write those books about Florence and Venice?

MCCARTHY

By chance. I was in Paris, just about to go home to America, and somebody called up and asked if I would come and have a drink at the Ritz before lunch, that he wanted to ask me something. It was an intermediary from the Berniers, who edit *L'Oeil*. They were in Lausanne, and this man wanted to know whether I would write a book on Venice for them. I had been in Venice once for ten days, years ago, but it seemed somehow adventurous. And there were other reasons too. So I said yes. I went out to meet the Berniers in Lausanne. I had absolutely no money left, about twenty dollars, and I thought, what if all this is a terrible practical joke? You know. I'll get to Lausanne and there won't be any of these people! There'll be nobody! I ran into Jay Laughlin that night, and

he said that his aunt was in Lausanne at the moment, so that if anything happened to me, I could call on her! But in any case, I went to Lausanne, and they were real, they were there. And we drove to Venice together.

I knew nothing about the subject—maybe I exaggerate my ignorance now—but I was *appalled*. I was afraid to ask any questions—whenever I'd ask a question Georges Bernier would shudder because it revealed such absolutely terrifying depths of ignorance. So I tried to be silent. I'd never heard before that there was more than one Tiepolo, or more than one Tintoretto, that there was a son. I vaguely knew Bellini, but didn't have any idea there were three Bellinis. Things like that. I couldn't have been expected to know Venetian history, but actually Venetian history is very easy to bone up on, and there isn't much. But the art history! And I considered myself a reasonably cultivated person! My art history was of the most fragmentary nature!

But it was fun, and then that led me into doing the Florence book. I didn't want to, at first. But everything in Venice—in Italy, for that matter—really points to Florence, everything in the Renaissance anyway, like signposts on a road. Whenever you're near discovery, you're near Florence. So I felt that this was all incomplete; I thought I had to go to Florence. It was far from my mind to write a book. Then various events happened, and slowly I decided, All right, I would do the book on Florence. After that I went back to Venice and studied the Florentines in Venice, just for a few days. It was *so* strange to come back to Venice after being immersed in Florence. It looked so terrible! From an architectural point of view, *so* scrappy and nondescript, if you'd been living with the Florentine substance and monumentality, and intellectuality of architecture. At first coming back was a real shock. Oh, and I discovered I liked history! And I thought, my God, maybe I've made a mistake. Maybe I should have been a historian.

INTERVIEWER

It would also appear that you discovered you loved Brunelleschi.

MCCARTHY

Oh, yes! Yes! Also, I felt a great, great congeniality—I don't mean with Brunelleschi personally, I would flatter myself if I said that—but with the history of Florence, the Florentine temperament. I felt that through the medium of writing about this city I could set forth what I believed in, what I was for; that through this city, its history, its architects and painters—more its sculptors than its painters—it was possible for me to say what I believed in. And say it very affirmatively, even though this all ended in 1529, you know, long before the birth of Shakespeare.

INTERVIEWER

In reading the Florence book, I remember being very moved by the passage where you talk of Brunelleschi, about his “absolute integrity and essence,” that solidity of his, both real and ideal. When you write about Brunelleschi, you write about this sureness, this “being-itself,” and yet as a novelist—in *The Company She Keeps* for instance—you speak of something so very different, and you take almost as a theme this fragmented unplaceability of the human personality.

MCCARTHY

But I was very young then. I think I'm really not interested in the quest for the self anymore. Oh, 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—how to express this—that you really must *make* the self. It's absolutely useless to look for it, you won't find it, but it's possible in some sense to make it. I don't mean in the sense of making a mask, a Yeatsian mask. But you finally begin in some sense to make and to choose the self you want.

INTERVIEWER

Can you write novels about that?

MCCARTHY

I never have. I never have, I've never even thought of it. That is, I've never thought of writing a developmental novel in which a self of some kind is discovered or is made, is forged, as they say. No. I suppose in a sense I don't know any more today than I did in 1941 about what my identity is. But I've stopped looking for it. I must say, I believe much more in truth now than I did. I do believe in the solidity of truth much more. Yes. I believe there is a truth, and that it's knowable.

