



Books

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LITERARY HORIZONS

Orations with Figures

IN VIEW of the number of books about contemporary authors that have been published in recent years, it is surprising that Doris Grumbach's *The Company She Kept* (Coward-McCann, \$6) should be the first book-length study of the writings of Mary McCarthy. Although Mrs. Grumbach is a teacher of English, the book is far from being academic in manner. Indeed, I wish it contained some of the machinery of scholarship—a bibliography, certainly, and at least a few notes to identify the less obvious sources of information. But I rejoice in its freedom from academic jargon. (It is perhaps relevant to point out that Mrs. Grumbach has written two novels, one of which, *The Spoil of the Flowers*, I have read with some interest.)

As the title suggests, Mrs. Grumbach has made much of the autobiographical elements in Miss McCarthy's fiction. "If I were dealing with a writer whose product was almost entirely imaginative," she states in her foreword, "this kind of treatment would not be useful, would not indeed yield enough evidence for a critical approach. In the case of Mary McCarthy there is only a faint line between what really happened to her, the people she knew and knows, including herself, and the characters in her fictions." Although there is nothing novel about finding Miss McCarthy in her books, critics are usually cautious about identifying characters in fiction with real people, and I am grateful for Mrs. Grumbach's refusal to beat around that particular bush.

As one who has followed Miss McCarthy's work from the beginning, I have always wondered how she acquired her sense of superiority to practically everybody else in the world—apparent in almost everything she has written. It seems probable that her peculiarly insecure early years, about which she wrote in *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, made it necessary for her to prove something about herself. Vassar was her first proving ground. Although, accord-

ing to Mrs. Grumbach, she was not voted "The Prettiest, The Best-Dressed, The Brightest, or The Most Likely to Succeed, nor anything else in that customary list," she was graduated with highest honors, and she was the first girl in her class to be married. More important, she seems to have learned that intolerance pays and that there may be more fun and more satisfaction in being feared than in being liked.

She carried that lesson with her to New York, and the first reviews she wrote for *The Nation* and *New Republic* showed skill with both cudgel and rapier. In 1935, only two years after graduation from Vassar, she published in *The Nation* a series of articles on contemporary critics, in which she lopped off heads with the insouciance of the Queen of Hearts. (Margaret Marshall, literary editor of *The Nation* at the time, was listed as her collaborator, but, Mrs. Grumbach reports, she had only a small share in the pieces.) Although she was careless with facts, as was often pointed out, this "intrepid young critic of critics," as Mrs. Grumbach calls her, immediately won a reputation as a person devoted to truth. What was really responsible for her fame, I suspect, was the pleasure most people take in public executions. She gave the same sort of pleasure in her criticism of Broadway plays for *Partisan Review*, and then in *The Oasis* she polished off some of her colleagues on that magazine. As someone said at the time, paraphrasing a well-known wisecrack about Hungarians, "Who needs an enemy with Mary McCarthy for a friend?"

We did not have to wait for Mrs. Grumbach to tell us that Meg Sargent in *The Company She Keeps*, Martha Sinent in *A Charmed Life*, and, in lesser degree, Kay Strong in *The Group* resemble Miss McCarthy. These are all highly superior young women, in contrast with whom most of the men are "truncated, wispy, weird underdog spirits." Speaking of *The Groves of Academe*, Mrs. Grumbach says: "Wom-

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en, as is usual in Mary McCarthy's books, come out somewhat better than the men, but they too do not go unscathed." Even the McCarthy-like heroines, it must quickly be noted, fare badly. Being so superior, they see their defects more clearly than anyone else, and they must excel in self-criticism as in all things. Since there is no other person capable of wielding the dagger, they turn it against themselves. Both Martha and Kay, we observe, come to ends that they may have subconsciously chosen.

Mrs. Grumbach defends *The Group* against the charge that the style is banal by arguing that Miss McCarthy is deliberately paraphrasing or even parodying the styles of her eight Vassar girls: "The novel's achievement is this elaborate orchestration. It is a choral work about a short period of history to be sung mainly by feminine voices, a persuasive and illuminating song-cycle." She continues: "But the failure of the

novel, if it fails, is that this achievement was not easily or readily recognized. It requires close reading to see the narrative method." It requires more than that; it requires a good imagination. I am sure that Mrs. Grumbach correctly states Miss McCarthy's intention, but I should like to choose some passages at random and ask her to identify Pokey's voice and Dottie's voice and Libby's voice, and so forth and so on.

"*The Group*," says Mrs. Grumbach, "is a negative book, a novel that brings bad 'news,' that conveys a hopeless, retrograde message." The eight students have learned nothing in college and little more in the six years since graduation. The novel satirizes a lost generation; but from what point of view? Satire is effective when the reader recognizes the behavior portrayed as a ridiculous and reprehensible departure from a norm. In statistical terms, the behavior Miss McCarthy describes probably comes



close to the norm for graduates of upper-class colleges for women in the early Thirties. And if she had other terms in mind, as I am sure she did, she never defines them. For that reason the novel, with its massive detail, becomes simply another example of Naturalism: this is the way things are.

In summary Mrs. Grumbach says: "Her fiction is really dramatized theses, orations with figures. . . . Her tendency in fiction is to document, to catalogue, to shore up with details." This is a harsh judgment, but essentially Miss McCarthy is a critic, a moralist. She aspires to superiority, wants only the best, and that is fine. But what is the best? She knows, she manages to suggest; although even so acute and faithful a reader as Mrs. Grumbach doesn't seem to be in on the secret.

—GRANVILLE HICKS.

LETTERS TO THE Book Review Editor



McKendree Conference

GORHAM MUNSON'S "Preview of Writers' Summer Conferences" [SR, Apr. 29] reported that the McKendree Writers' Conference in Lebanon "pledges to return next year from suspension this summer." It is true that a week-long conference will be held again next summer, but in the meantime a very fine one-day conference has been planned for Saturday, June 24, by the president of the McKendree Writers' Association and director of the one-day session, Carroll Hall, 2041 Lindsay Road, Springfield, Ill. 62704. The conference will be held on the McKendree College campus in Lebanon, as usual.

Interested persons may request a brochure on the conference from Dr. Clyde Funkhouser, McKendree College, Lebanon, Ill. 62254.

MRS. LEON H. CHURCH.

Lebanon, Ill.

Eliot No Exception

IN EUROPEAN LITERARY SCENE [SR, May 6] Robert J. Clements says, "A fortnight ago I found myself in the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey, standing inadvertently on a new metal grave cover for Thomas Stearns Eliot."

When I visited Westminster Abbey, our guide told us that only those who were actually buried in the Abbey had plaques in the floor. The others (including Shakespeare, buried at Stratford) had plaques on the wall.

Since T. S. Eliot was cremated and his ashes buried in East Coker, Somerset, England, I am wondering if an exception was made in his case so that his marker is in the Abbey floor.

VELMA WEST SYKES.

Kansas City, Mo.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The British Information Service has verified that T. S. Eliot's plaque in Westminster Abbey is in the floor; they could, however, not locate any reference to a ruling that only those buried in the Abbey had plaques in the floor.*

Language of the Specialists

DAVID GLIXON SEEMS TO HAVE MISREAD "Language of the Specialists" as "Language for the Specialist." [SR, May 20]. He is perhaps a little unkind when he pins the label of "farce" on a book of reference that represents the views of twenty competent scholars, each an expert in his own field, as to what constitutes an acceptable cross-section of his own jargon for the understanding of the layman. The contributors were left free to make their lists as lengthy (or as brief) as they deemed necessary for the purpose.

It is Mr. Glixon's privilege to dislike military terminology, which nevertheless

looms somewhat large on the present-day scene. His objectivity may be measured by the fact that the number of entries in the Military section (the only one, according to him, treated with generosity) is 136.

The language of the Construction Industries has 141 entries, that of Philosophy 106, that of Political Science 107. The average for all sections is about 100. As a sample of completeness in a single division, Political Science includes items (*Cosa Nostra*, *hawk* and *dove* in their current acceptance, the phrase *eyeball to eyeball*) which appear in none of our current large dictionaries, including the Webster III of 1961 and the Random House of 1966.

It is also his privilege not to like literary quotations as running heads. But, *à lui ne déplaît*, there does seem to be some meaningful connection between "Arrangers of the Stars" and the Language of Astronomy, and between "A Tool for Every Job" and the Language of the Construction Trades.

MARIO PEI.

New York, N. Y.

Got to Get Gout from Gutta

ROLLENE W. SAAL, in discussing "Posh Food" in PICK OF THE PAPERBACKS [SR, May 20], asks, "Where does it all lead? To gout. In French, remember, *gôûter* means 'to taste.'"

Gôûter in French does indeed mean "to taste," but I believe there is confusion here in the etymologies of *gout* and *taste*. *Gout* comes from the Latin *gutta*, a drop, so named from being attributed to a deflexion of humors, a disease characterized by excess uric acid in the blood and deposits of such salts in the tissues around the joints.

But *to taste* comes from the Latin verb *gustare*, a different root than *gutta*, and shows up in such words as *gustatory*.

LAKENAN BARNES.

Mexico, Mo.

Poets Rescue Reading

MY HIGHEST PRAISE TO GRANVILLE HICKS for his "Art Lost in Analysis," as I have experienced both types of college teachers and methods. My most exciting, enduring, and educational university literature course was engineered by these six publishing poets: Margaret Avison, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Allen Ginsberg, Denise Levertov, and Charles Olson. This course was at Vancouver, Canada, in the summer of 1963.

Other universities would benefit from similar courses, as present methods cause thousands annually to lose their reading habit.

BERNICE LEVER.

Columbus, O.