

IDEAS AND THE NOVEL
Mary McCarthy / Harcourt Brace Jovanovich / \$7.95

William H. Nolte

Miss McCarthy begins the first of these four brilliant lectures with a delightful quotation guaranteed to make the cognoscenti slap their shanks and leap with joy: "He had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it." T.S. Eliot, of course, writing of Henry James. Using the quotation (intended by Eliot as high praise of The Master) as a motto, or rather counter-motto, for the reflections that follow, Miss McCarthy proceeds to "take exception, not to the truth of Eliot's pronouncement (he was right about James), but to the set of lofty assumptions calmly towering behind it." If she employs James as a foil and as a point of departure for her discussion of the great nineteenth-century novelists, who without exception considered ideas as being intrinsic

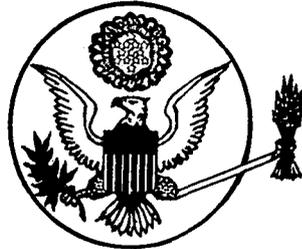
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to the novelistic medium, she by no means seeks simply to dispose of him or write him off as an odd mutation. But her assessment of his achievements will certainly ruffle the feathers of devout Jamesians, a sensitive breed (*Gallus gallus*) given to defending the Old Pretender with tart rejoinders. As one who on occasion has publicly remarked the artful emptiness of James's fictions, I can attest to the decorous wrath of the True Believers.

To be sure, Miss McCarthy is hardly the first critic to note that when James "purified" the novel and thereby elevated it to a high art form he was actually performing a procrustean act. In effect, he not only rendered it of all fatty tissue but also lopped off its arms and legs, disembowelled it, drained it of all its human juices, and—to banish any ideological content—cut off its head. Which is to say, in a less anatomical

fashion, he cleansed his fictive art of both mind and matter, of the things of this world and of any ideas we might have about those things. As Miss McCarthy puts it, he scraped "his sacred texts clean of the material factor." Certainly no small achievement since his novels are frequently concerned (in a very general way) with property and money; moreover, his tales are played out "almost exclusively in the realm of the social, mundane by definition." He did what no other novelist had done, or even considered doing, before: He turned the novel into an *objet d'art*—lifeless

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as a stone and empty as a jug. Even when she exaggerates the baleful effect of James's example, Miss McCarthy's blade strikes fire, as in this: "He etheralized the novel beyond its wildest dreams and perhaps etherized it as well."

Concerning the extent of James's influence or legacy, Miss McCarthy seems to be of two minds. In saying that he did this or that to "the novel," she implies that he changed the course of the art form, and changed it for the worse; but almost in the same breath she notes various major writers who seem to have been impervious to his example. Salient examples come to mind at once: Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, Malraux's *Man's Fate*, Huxley's *Point Counterpoint* (indeed all of Huxley), the fiction of Sartre and Iris Murdoch, the highly didactic novels of Solzhenitsyn, and many others she does not name. In truth, James's influence has been slight. After all, novelists still include in their stories all that James barred as extraneous—including the discussion of ideas. D.H. Lawrence, for instance, ended by writing tracts or sermons, which is paradoxical when you consider that Lawrence abhorred the intellect, or "upper story" as he called it.

Only in recent years, Miss McCarthy argues in her final chapter,

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has the "novel of ideas" been sent to Coventry, although dispensation has been granted to the Jewish novel. Just why the goys are confined to playing with images while the likes of Bellow, Malamud, and Philip Roth are free to juggle ideas Miss McCarthy doesn't say. She simply concludes, rather too hastily and unconvincingly, with the assertion that for the novel to be revitalized it will be necessary "to disarm and disorient reviewers and teachers of literature, who, as always, are the reader's main foe." If reviewers were given better books to review I daresay they would note the fact, and the pedagogues are generally too abstruse (or obtuse) to have much effect on anyone but themselves. Better reasons for the sad state of contemporary fiction can surely be found.

What makes this slender volume worth the price is the simple fact that Miss McCarthy has something important to say about important books and, above all, knows how to say it in a sharp and fresh manner. I had never quite realized the extent to which such writers as Stendhal, Tolstoy, Hugo, Dostoevsky, Flaubert, and Balzac were concerned with ideas, or—in the case of Stendhal and Dostoevsky—with showing the evil effects ideas may have. Miss McCarthy is at her best when she shows how Dostoevsky, in *The Possessed*, was drawn to dangerous ideas "as if to a potent drug," or how Stendhal, in *The Red and the Black*, probably intended Julien Sorel's career as "a wicked analogy with the career of Jesus." She also describes the great

interest novelists of the period had in Napoleon, not just as Emperor, but as Idea. Hegel, at Jena, had called Napoleon "an idea on horseback"; later, in *War and Peace*, Tolstoy sought to cut that Idea down to size.

Ideas and the Novel is a vigorous and forthright little book about a matter of importance to all readers of books. If we are moved more by the

idea of things than by the things themselves, then there would certainly seem to be a place in fiction for ideas. After all, fiction, unlike the visual arts, must feed off mental constructs if it is to have weight in the world or do more than idly entertain. Without ideological content, a novel will invariably leave the withers unprung. □

CRACKERS

Roy Blount, Jr. / Knopf / \$10.95

Theo Lippman, Jr.

Poor Roy Blount. He comes out with this adoring campaign biography of Jimmy Carter and whammo! down goes Carter to the worst defeat any incumbent president has ever suffered. I know just how he feels. I am, as you all know, the man who wrote successive campaign biographies of Edmund Muskie, Spiro Agnew, and Edward Kennedy.

"Adoring" is a word of the art. Book reviewers use it to show that the author likes his subject even though they do not. I think it is overused. Sure, I didn't mention Chappaquiddick in *Senator Ted Kennedy*, but

Theo Lippman, Jr. writes editorials for the Baltimore Sun.

that wasn't because I wanted to show him in an adorable light. You can't get *everything* in. I just thought his speech on the 1966 Public Works Appropriations Bill was more significant.

Roy Blount adores Jimmy Carter because they are both Georgians. I do not because I am a Georgian. He thinks Jimmy Carter's election ennobled what he calls Crackro-Americans. "We ain't trash no more!" his brother-in-law hollered when Jimmy Carter was nominated. That was the right note, says Blount. Actually his brother-in-law is from East Texas, but that's a quibble. All regional sociologists agree that East Texas is quite Georgian—better than South Georgia but worse than North Georgia. Anyway, ennobled may be the wrong word. What Blount says the election of Jimmy Carter was was "vindication" of a people who "have blithely been called rednecks, Crackers, white trash, Snopeses, and peckerwoods" for years. "Our people" had finally produced a presidential persona who in 1980 as in 1976 was superior to Ronald Reagan, John Anderson, and Ted Kennedy and who "still hasn't caused any shooting anywhere," a noble, adorable accomplishment last achieved by Herbert Hoover.

But the way I look at it is that "our people" are now being blamed for Carteresque (and Lance-esque and Jordan-esque and Jody Powell-esque) failures that are the result not of Georgian attributes but of the personal, individual shortcomings of their perpetrators. Let's face it. The Carter administration has given Crackers a bad name. Even in Georgia. The voters of Georgia just

There is opportunity in America!



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