
How to Be Selective with Ideas?

Mary McCarthy: *Ideas and the Novel*; Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; New York.

by Stephen L. Tanner

“He had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it.” This reference to Henry James by T. S. Eliot is offered by Mary McCarthy as a countermotto for this transcription of the Northcliffe Lectures she delivered last year at University College, London. Her thesis is that novelists of the 19th century, particularly those on the continent, generously and consciously used ideas in their fiction. They had a philosophy of life and desired to communicate it to the public and did so, either directly or through the mouths of their characters. And the public was interested; it expected and appreciated ideas in novels. “So intrinsic to the novelistic medium were ideas and other forms of commentary,” says McCarthy, “that it would have been impossible in former days to speak of ‘the novel of ideas.’ It would have seemed to be a tautology.”

But things are different now, she argues. Nowadays, “Ideas are held not to belong in the novel: in the art of fiction we have progressed beyond such simplicities.” The modern novel “is a formal, priestly exercise whose first great celebrant was James.” And even if Jamesian novels are not being written, his model “remains the standard, an archetype, against which contemporary impurities and laxities are measured.” A novel with ideas in it marks itself as dated. Even with her preference for the 19th-century approach, she admits that in writing novels herself she has had to accede and adapt to “progress” in the genre.

The arguments, which are restatements and extensions of those pub-

lished nearly 20 years ago in the literary essays in *On the Contrary*, are unconvincing. She has a gift for the striking generalization and memorable phrase, but not for profound and sustained thought and analysis. Consider, for example, this statement: “In the U.S.A., a special license has always been granted to the Jewish novel, which is free to juggle ideas in full view of the public; Bellow, Malamud, Philip Roth still avail themselves of the right, which is never conceded to us goys.” This sticks in the reader’s mind, but it won’t bear close scrutiny. Granted that Bellow loves to treat ideas (and his case alone seems to go far in refuting her thesis of a modern fiction that has scrapped ideas); is that fact explained solely by his Jewishness? Do Malamud and Roth really use more ideas than their Gentile counterparts? Who is it, anyway, who grants the special license?

The fundamental problem with her arguments lies in her use of the word *idea*. *Idea* is a slippery term that is applied to things as different as a concept, an impression, a topic, an opinion, a plan of action, an intention, a design, a mental image and so on. She never specifies precisely what she means by it and obviously shifts from one meaning to another. Sometimes she uses *idea* to refer to the central theme of a novel; other times she uses the term to refer to subjects treated or issues discussed by characters.

Most often she has in mind political or social ideas, although she never makes this explicit. For example, she claims that George Eliot’s novels do not treat ideas; a possible exception: *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Ideas for George Eliot, she says condescendingly, were “wholesome moral reflections.” There are few ideas in Dickens because “the incubus or succuba preying on Dickens’s people is usually nothing clearly identifiable as a theory or concise program”; a possible exception: *Hard Times*. Her

notion of ideas functioning importantly in a novel seems most aptly realized in the discussions of socialism in Dostoyevsky’s *The Possessed*. Her bias is implicit, but clear enough to the careful reader. And once the bias is recognized, her generalizations about ideas and the novel begin to fall apart of their own weight. For example, she claims Henry James banished ideas from his novels. That is true enough for political ideas, I suppose, particularly when political ideas are simply viewed as current events and issues; but his novels are filled with other kinds of ideas.

Connected with the problems created by an amorphous or idiosyncratic use of the term *idea* are those created by a false distinction between the novel of ideas and the novel of images. The distinction is not meaningful because although a novelist might emphasize either ideas or images, he cannot totally separate the two. They stick to each other and lose force as they come unglued.

Although McCarthy is not precise and accurate in delineating and accounting for the differences between pre-Jamesian and post-Jamesian novels, her general sense of that difference is correct. The question of ideas is part of it, but the more fundamental elements have to do with a shift in world views and the rise of antimimetic literary theories. David Daiches is more illuminating when he discusses in *The Novel and the Modern World* the breakdown of communal standards and values in the late 19th and early 20th centuries: “The modern novelist is born when [a] publicly shared principle of selection and significance is no longer felt to exist, can no longer be depended upon.” Daiches implies that if a culture can no longer provide a sense of what is significant and valuable in life (and therefore in fiction, which according to the traditional view imitates life), the artist is forced to sub-

stitute formal or aesthetic values for cultural values. In other words, the formalistic character of modern fiction, the impulse toward "pure art," which McCarthy finds so repellent, is closely related to a divorce between literary and cultural values.

W. J. Harvey treats the same phenomenon in *Character and the Novel* when he discusses the individual's sense of insecurity when his relation to his world is no longer "given stability by being part of a divinely-ordered cosmos." According to Harvey, the response of early 20th-century novelists was to seek a sense of stability in the work of art itself:

Because the work of art—viewed as a self-sufficient artifact—is a necessary and not a contingent thing. It is a thing wrenched from the chaotic flux of the experienced world; it has its own laws and its own firm structure of relationships; it can, like a system of geometry, be held to be absolutely true within its own conveniently established terms.

Thus the novelist's task is to present an ordered world *in contrast to*, not in imitation of, the world of ordinary experience. The change that McCarthy attributes to an elimination of ideas from fiction actually results from the antimimetic tendencies generated by the breakdown of traditional religious and cultural values.

Henry James is the villain of *Ideas and the Novel*. While it is true that he wrought significant changes in the art of fiction, changes leading away from the 19th-century novels McCarthy admires, she might to some extent be giving him a bum rap. Timothy P. Martin in "Henry James and Percy Lubbock: From Mimesis to Formalism" (*Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, Fall 1980) argues persuasively that many of the ideas and attitudes ascribed to James actually originated with Lubbock. In *The Craft of Fiction*, one of the seminal theoretical works of our century, Lubbock's debt

to James is great and clearly acknowledged. But the ideas of the two have been identified too closely and the differences oversimplified. According to Martin, James, for all his interest in the formal aspects of fiction, was ultimately a mimetic critic whose primary interest was in a novel's relationship to reality and its moral quality. Lubbock was the rigorous formalist. "For James, fiction was a means to an end; for Lubbock, fiction was an end in itself."

McCarthy suggests that James's alleged exclusion of ideas in the sense of mental concepts was a consequence



of his "exclusion of common factuality." She recognizes a strong affinity between ideas and facts. In an essay on "The Fact in Fiction" (1960), she claims that "The passion for fact in a raw state is a peculiarity of the novelist. Most of the great novels contain blocks and lumps of fact—refractory lumps in the porridge of the story." She thinks the novel resembles the newspaper, with odds and ends of information and the news items of the day. "Even when it is most serious, the novel's characteristic is one of gossip and tittle-tattle." These attitudes are reflected in her own fiction. *The Group* bears a cumbersome burden of facts and "tittle-tattle"; indeed, the heavy reliance on the cataloguing of details culled from real life gives the

impression that life has not been sufficiently strained through the refining net of the author's imagination.

The case of *Birds of America* is similar. The cataloguing of subjects that pass through the mind of the liberal undergraduate main character—the Goldwater campaign, Vietnam, communism, the C.I.A., civil-rights marches—seem interminable and not closely related to the novel's alleged main theme, which is made explicit in the last sentence: "Nature is dead."

Her theory of fiction is based on the notion that if she gets the details or facts right they will have coherence and pattern. The pattern is in the experience and should not be imposed from the outside. There is truth in this, but applied in her own novels, the theory's limitations become immediately apparent. In great novels, facts follow ideas—the shaping and selecting imagination actively orders the flux of experience instead of merely describing it.

Ideas and the Novel is eminently readable, and it is interesting to observe McCarthy's quick mind responding to the great French and Russian novels of the 19th century (these are her main focus); but her tendency to view ideas as exclusively social or political and to confuse ideas with topical facts and information is disappointing. In a book with such a title, one would like the ideas considered to be fundamental ones concerning the nature of man and his relationship to his world, his fellow men, and his God. As Henry James, McCarthy's *bête noire*, said in an 1874 essay on Turgenev:

The great question as to a poet or a novelist is, How does he feel about life? What, in the last analysis, is his philosophy? When vigorous writers have reached maturity we are at liberty to look in their works for some expression of a total view of the world they have been so actively observing. This is the most interesting thing their works offer us. Details are interesting in proportion as they contribute to make it clear. □

What Faulkner's Life Was All About

David Minter: *William Faulkner: His Life and Work*; The Johns Hopkins University Press; Baltimore.

by Earl Hilton

One's first reaction to yet another book about Faulkner is likely to be "Why?" But as one reads Minter's book several points become evident. He writes with clarity and even grace. He largely avoids those convoluted sentences into which literary critics seem to fall in their attempt to record complexities of thought and feeling, and then too often cultivate as a mark of their calling. He has read all of Faulkner's writing now available, including drafts, unpublished manuscripts and letters—and he has read thoughtfully. He probably has not read all the works about Faulkner, for that would have left him no time for reading Faulkner. But he has read the major biographers and critics. He cites thirteen memoirs by members of Faulkner's family and acquaintances. He knows well the body of American and world literature upon which Faulkner drew and against which his work must be seen if we are fully to understand it. He notes, as others have, similarities between the life and works of Hawthorne and those of Faulkner. Where others have stressed the break between Faulkner and Sherwood Anderson, Minter rightly stresses Faulkner's continuing sense of indebtedness to Anderson and his admiration for Anderson's best work. He is the first author I have read who explicates elements in Faulkner's thought and feeling by quoting lines from Robert Frost. He honors his readers by not identifying all quotations and allusions.

Minter does not claim major new discoveries in Faulkner's biography or

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major new readings of his novels. His work is more a sifting and a synthesis. It tells, he says, "of deep reciprocities, of relation and revisions between Faulkner's flawed life and his great art."

In these days when everyone who encounters a famous or notorious person publishes a memoir or a novel, the flaws and sorrows cannot be concealed. Faulkner married his childhood sweetheart, Estelle Oldham, but only after she had married and divorced another, and apparently after he had ceased to love her. The marriage was unhappy for both. Both were expert spenders but poor savers, constantly in debt. He bought Rowan Oak and expended effort and money on its restoration, determined to create there a life "ante-bellum and stately." Trying to support Rowan Oak and expensive tastes, he endured exile in Hollywood and wrote stories he considered potboilers. An affair with Meta Doherty lasted through several stints in Hollywood. In his later years there was another abortive affair with a younger woman. He repeatedly told tall stories as fact, causing embarrassment to friends and unwary biographers. From early in youth he drank too much. He often neglected to eat while on drinking sprees, once remarking that there is a lot of nourishment in an acre of corn. His last years, with intermis-



sions when his writing went well, were spent in depression, depression so deep that once, like Hemingway, he accepted shock therapy. Death was hastened by alcohol and a series of injuries caused by reckless riding. All this is told with, in Minter's term, "tenderness" for its subject. We are left with admiration for the work and sympathy for a man apparently poorly equipped to deal with what Walker Percy calls "everydayness."

But such details do not tell that part of Faulkner's life that most concerns us. A reviewer said of a recent biography of Edith Wharton that now we know everything about her except why and how she wrote. Minter avoids that error. Faulkner once said that writing gave him something to get up for in the morning. In another mood he saw it as the artist's defiance of death. Minter quotes Shelby Foote on Faulkner: "Writing, to him, was what living was all about." When he withdrew into his austere study, symbolically taking the doorknob with him, Faulkner lived intently, regardless of exterior circumstances. When he was writing, he controlled his drinking.

Here, certainly, was one reciprocity between writing and life. The reverse, life contributing to writing, is in some cases obvious, in others more questionable, although Minter always offers support for his inferences. Everyone knows how he transmuted stories told in his family or around the courthouse square (and, Minter adds, a library well stocked with histories of the South) into his imaginary kingdom of Yoknapatawpha. He did not, as he claimed, fly with the RAF and receive injuries requiring frequent medication with whiskey. But his three months of ground training did give him a lifelong interest in aviation and furnished material for two novels. The poetry to which he devoted his youth was derivative and inferior, but it contributed to the unabashed rhetoric of his fiction. Minter makes a promising