

INTRODUCTION OF MARY McCARTHY
Montgomery Endowment Visitor to Dartmouth College
November 1980

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We live today in an age of rampant classification and division. In politics this year, we have not only the Democrats and the Republicans but also the Libertarians and a so-called Unity Party that will almost certainly split the Democratic vote.

In the academy, and specifically in this college of liberal arts that professes to free the minds of its students from narrowly categorical ways of thinking, we too have our divisions: the Humanities, the Natural Sciences, and the Social Sciences. And within these divisions are various departments, including my own department of English, where we offer separate courses in English literature and American literature, and where we also have special and separate courses in Black American literature, Native American literature, and of course feminist literature.

If you move out beyond the groves of academe into the world of literary reviews, learned journals, and academic conventions, the literary categories become ever more intricate and Byzantine: you have academic Jewish writers and urban Jewish writers; ghetto writers, regionalists, local colorists, Southern writers who stay put on native ground like Faulkner and Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor and then *emigré* Southern writers like Massa William Styron, who leave behind the tidewater shores and the cotton fields and the tobacco plantations and take up residence in such exotic places as *Connecticut!* The literary categories are endless, and the new ones seem to spring up every day: gay Black writers, straight Black-writers, academic-Marxists, non-academic Lesbian Chicanos. (I have to confess that I just invented that last category for this occasion, but don't be surprised to find it enshrined on the front page of the next issue of the *New York Times Book Review Section*.)

Now I mention all of these categories simply because the particular writer whose voice you are about to hear fits none of them.

She fits none of the new categories nor any of the old ones, none of the comfortable and familiar niches to which authors are usually consigned in bookstores, libraries, and college curricula. Author of no less than twenty books in all, with one more coming out shortly, she *is and is not* an autobiographer, a journalist, a novelist, an essayist, a drama critic, a literary critic, and a cultural historian.

If we want to be categorical, of course, we can cite her achievements in various categories. In the autobiographical mode, her *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (1957), published 23 years ago, is a fascinating account of what happened to a sensitive, searching, and extraordinarily tough-minded child who was born to Irish Catholic parents in Seattle, Washington, orphaned at the age of six when both her parents died of influenza, and then shuttled back and forth between two sets of grandparents and three different religions.

In the realm of fiction, her seven novels include such justly celebrated works as *The Groves of Academe* (1952), a deliciously mordant and unfortunately sometimes accurate portrayal of the life we academics lead, and *The Group* (1963), a sardonic tale of eight young Vassar graduates in the 1930's which is at once a captivating piece of fiction and (as one reviewer called it) a "gem of American social history." Her latest novel is *Cannibals and Missionaries* (1979), a story of hijacking and hostages that somehow manages to combine such disparate subjects as torture in Iran, Palestinian terrorists, and the rarefied world of art collecting.

As an art critic and cultural historian herself, the author of *Cannibals and Missionaries* has also produced two richly detailed and provocatively argued books on two great centers of Renaissance culture, Venice and Florence. As a drama critic, she has watched and analyzed American theatre for years; as a literary theorist, she has suggestively speculated on the disappearance of character from modern fiction and on the complex relation between fiction and fact. As a journalist, she has turned her uncanny eye on subject ranging from the murder of Ghandi to the macabre comedy of the Watergate conspiracy trials; as an essayist, she has turned her relentlessly penetrating mind on subjects ranging from the tyranny of the orgasm

to the atrocity of the Vietnam War and the ultimately unspeakable horror of the atomic bomb.

Altogether, then, she is one of the least classifiable writers I know, and least of all is she classifiable as a woman writer. If we are now tempted to call her that, let us remember that she made her name in print long before the establishment of feminist literature as such, long before the ladies' room became The Women's Room and thence a national shrine, long before the "woman writer" became a bankable commodity in the marketplace and a canonized saint in the temple of academe.

This particular woman writer made her name in the forties and fifties, when writing was almost entirely a man's game played by men's rules, when for women who wanted to write anything more than gossip columns and chicken recipes there was no special quarter asked, and none given. This particular woman writer made her name not by exploiting the special agonies and ecstasies of her sex but rather by demonstrating the muscularity of her thought, the pungency of her wit, and the stunning lucidity of her prose.

As a writer her stance is combative, quality encapsulated in the very title of one book of her essays, *On the Contrary* (1961). But if her stance is combative, her style is never crudely aggressive. She writes with her fingertips, not with her fist. Her style is superbly incisive, as if every sentence had been honed to a razor's edge.

Coleridge said that the razor's edge becomes a saw to the armed vision. The person we gather to hear tonight writes with such a vision: a vision armed with journalist's power to see, the essayist's power to meditate, the novelist's power to create, and the autobiographer's power to explore the self.

To sum up all of these powers, I have no other word than *writer*: unadorned, unqualified by any adjective, uncompromised by any category. I use the word "writer" as Robert Frost used the word "poet." Frost said that he could not call himself a poet because that was a praise word, a word for others to use about him (as of course Frost expected them to). But I think of "writer" as a praise word too, and it is the only word that really fits the person you are about to hear.

So it gives me the greatest of pleasure to introduce to you a person whom I will not call a Catholic writer, or a woman writer, or a journalist, or an essayist, or a cultural historian, or a theatre critic, or a novelist, or even "the first lady of American letters," but rather simply, unequivocally, and magisterially . . . a writer: MARY McCARTHY!