

## Renaissance Women: Brigid Brophy, Mary McCarthy and the Public Intellectual

Christine Brooke-Rose begins her introduction to the 2002 edition of Brigid Brophy's 1969 novel *In Transit* by noting that "during the sixties," Brophy had been "briefly known in London literary circles as the brainiest woman in Britain." At the same time, she ruefully acknowledges that this "was a token woman label in a male society," and reminisces about spending a party with Brophy "thinking up earlier examples" of such isolated female intellectuals (Brooke-Rose i). The only comparison they could draw was to the American author and critic Mary McCarthy who, seventeen years Brophy's senior, had burst onto the national scene in the US in the 1940s with her debut work *The Company She Keeps* (1942) and her highly intellectual, often scathing essays and reviews for publications like *The Nation*, *New Republic*, and *Partisan Review*. In spite of McCarthy's seniority, the comparison was an apt one in many respects; more so, perhaps, than either Brooke-Rose or Brophy realised. During the mid-twentieth-century, on both sides of the Atlantic, the public intellectual had come to take on a much more prominent - and sharply defined - role. As women, Brophy and McCarthy already stood out amongst an overwhelmingly male group of thinkers and writers. But what made both women more problematic as intellectuals were the ways their thinking cut against the grain on pivotal issues of progress and freedom, exposing and often satirising the hypocrisy of their male contemporaries. Their dissident positions provided a counter-model to that of the male intellectual that allowed female writers like Susan Sontag or Maureen Duffy to take on public roles without conforming to the traditional expectations of a public intellectual, opening up a new discursive space for female writers in the 1970s and beyond.

If Brophy is largely neglected as a novelist today, her role as a public intellectual is even more marginal, while if McCarthy is remembered for her friendship with Hannah Arendt, various rivalries, or success with *The Group*, [then](#) her pivotal role in breaking ground for future female writers and critics in the US remains equally overlooked. This shared neglect stems from both writers' refusal to conform to a particular model of public intellectual, tied to a university-centred liberal humanism in the UK, and a magazine-centred liberalism in the US. Their success and profile as fiction writers lent them something of the air of outsider; retrospectively, it rendered them too awkward to accommodate with studies of the high profile, liberal critics and commentators who dominated Anglo-American thinking from the 1940s to the 1970s. Indeed, both were

active during a period where the public intellectual was defined by a kind of progressive politics - particularly with regards to art - typically grounded in a liberal thinking that was associated implicitly with a democratic, capitalist social narrative: a model of constant progress. McCarthy and Brophy, however, both refused to accept that art or society necessarily improved. Both had extensive classical training, with Greek and Latin evident in their writing, and more generally, their erudite fictions integrated references to past masters not simply through pastiche or parody, but also with a sense of integrity and respect. Both were interested in the arts more broadly, including music, painting, and theatre - Brophy wrote several plays (with one produced during her lifetime), while McCarthy began her career as a theatre critic for *The Partisan Review*. Most importantly, they shared a particular - and, for the time, peculiar - investment in the history and aesthetics of the Italian Renaissance (alongside, in Brophy's case, a liberal dash of the Baroque and Rococo), which for both writers came to symbolise a kind of golden period of artistic expression that was at odds with the predominating narrative of cultural progress, which might have valued the past, but nevertheless championed the present. It was their holistic artistic thinking, coupled with a seemingly conservative perspective on art - intent on recovering and integrating it into the present, rather than obsessively reworking and making it new - that set Brophy and McCarthy apart from contemporaries like Iris Murdoch or, to a certain extent, Sontag, and this is why their status as public intellectuals has been so overlooked. It might be contentious to describe someone as socially progressive as Brophy as aesthetically conservative, but like McCarthy, her work replicates circular, patterned structures that contain, rather than expand.

[In order to understand why this formal conservatism—which both writers connected to older aesthetic regimes, especially those of the Italian Renaissance—placed them at odds with their contemporaries in the intellectual mainstream, one needs to first ask what a public intellectual looked like in the mid-twentieth century. Today, the very idea of a public intellectual seems somehow passé, and certainly, from a critical perspective, it is clear that a paradigm shift in the last twenty years has seen what David Herman calls “academic philosophers” marginalised from popular culture on both sides of the Atlantic. In a 2017 essay for \*New Statesman\* entitled “Whatever Happened to the Public Intellectual?”, Herman suggests that since the late 1990s, “academic philosophy” has “lost its place in mainstream British culture.” Nancy Kates’ 2014 documentary \*Regarding Susan Sontag\* reached a similar conclusion, following the thesis that Sontag was the last of the American public intellectuals. I point to this contemporary narrative less](#)

because of what it says about a current cultural vacuum than for what it implies about the role of the public intellectual in the UK and the US in the decades before the new millennium: their current absence is so notable because of their earlier importance.

In America, the very concept of the public intellectual was shaped and defined by a rough group of McCarthy's New York-based (and almost exclusively male) peers, known as the New York Intellectuals. As cultural and social commentators, this diverse group of writers including Clement Greenberg, Dwight MacDonald, Irving Howe, Lionel Trilling, and McCarthy's future editor at the *Partisan Review*, Phillip Rahv, advocated for a model of liberalism that was initially associated with Communism, before turning stridently against it. Many, including Howe, Rahv, and Trilling, were not only cultural commentators, but prominent literary critics. As Hugh Wilford notes, however, it is their "political activities" as much as their social commentary that have become "part of the canon of twentieth-century American intellectual history." Conversely, as Herman's essay neatly emphasises, in the UK the postwar public intellectual was associated more with philosophy than with politics (Herman points to Alain de Botton as their spiritual successor). What united these otherwise disparate individuals was their emphasis on an outwardly progressive liberalism, which, although less strident in the UK, developed into the unifying feature of the American political scene in the mid-twentieth century. To this effect, Louis Hartz, in his 1955 text *The Liberal Tradition in America*, offered a narrative of American history that is characteristic of the position held more widely by the New York Intellectuals, in that it places the concept of 'liberalism' at the centre of American culture and history. Arguing that "the American community is a liberal community" (1), he suggested that a belief in the primacy of individual freedom constituted the foundation for national identity. While never as stridently nationalist as their American counterparts, British public intellectuals foregrounded the same need for individual freedom. Anne Rowe and Avril Horner, for instance, stress the "unique importance of the individual" to Brophy's peer and sometime-lover, Iris Murdoch, arguing that this spirit of liberalism recurs throughout her fiction and criticism.

Another factor that distinguished both writers and distanced them from mainstream intellectuals was a shared cultural Catholicism; although both developed profoundly atheistic positions as adults, they also acknowledged their debt to a Catholic perspective in their upbringing that differentiated them from their peers. McCarthy did so perhaps more publically, in her acclaimed 1957 memoir *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*,

however several of her comments were refigured by Brophy in such pieces as a 1965 essay for *New Statesman* titled “Am I an Irishwoman?” Although Brophy here protests that she is English “by nativity, schooling and economics,” and that she “possess[es] none of the standard Irish characteristics,” she also admits that she “feel[s] a foreigner in England,” identifying herself as part of “a highly specialised class... those who are reared as Irish in England.” Much as McCarthy would identify her Catholic upbringing as the source of her contrary, anti-hierarchical inclinations, Brophy sees herself (and other like her) as “representatives of the opposite process” – those who question the status quo, and who reject claims of authority. Of course, a claim on Irishness carried different connotations on either side of the Atlantic; whereas in the UK, as Brophy’s comments suggest, it signified a culture alterneity and resistance to authority, in the US it implied a cultural Catholicism. ~~Both~~ But both writers ~~nonetheless, then,~~ opened a public space for dissent by laying a claim to difference, rather than attempting to conform to the expectations of traditional, male intellectualism.

Indeed, while she may not have been aware of it, Brophy may have passed within metres of McCarthy long before she drew the comparison between herself and her American near-contemporary, in a (near) crossing of paths that exemplifies the strong ideological connection between these two writers. In 1956, both women travelled to, and published books centred on Venice: for Brophy, it was her second novel, the sometimes whimsical, sometimes satiric *King of a Rainy Country*; for McCarthy, it was the first of two non-fiction accounts of Italian cities, *Venice Observed*. Both writers visited~~travelled to~~ Venice ~~at the same time~~within months of one another, and their books reflect not only a passionate love for the city’s architecture, but a rich understanding of its culture history. Not only did they visit overlapping cities around Italy throughout ~~the~~that year, but both also began to orient their aesthetic and political judgments around the qualities they admired in the artworks and architecture of Italy. For McCarthy, it would be Florence, rather than Venice that would act as a future artistic touchstone; that same year, she produced her second ‘documentary’ account of an Italian city, *The Stones of Florence*, where she recognised something she later described as a “great congeniality” with “the history of Florence,” or what she called “the Florentine temperament” (“Art of Fiction” 94). This could as easily have been expressed by Brophy, whose investment in Florence is

reflected as much in her husband's major art historical work as in her own fiction.<sup>1</sup>

McCarthy explained in an interview for the *Paris Review* the sense of intellectual entelechy that she felt in writing about the city, where she

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.

This kind of identification with the past, where the values McCarthy read onto the physical structures of Florence allowed her to recognize and assert her own identity in the present, also contributes to the sense of closure in Brophy's *King of a Rainy Country*. The novel as a whole is structured around the attempts of its protagonist, Susan, to integrate her own past, in the form of a high school romance with another girl, successfully into her present, leading to a picaresque trip through Europe that culminates in an extended stay in Venice. For Susan, Venice becomes the one place she does not feel "homesick" (239) - where she feels a sense of ease and self-assurance - and across Brophy's essays, her preference for the Renaissance or the Rococo (as opposed to the Gothic) suggests the extent to which she too used these subjects as a way to bring her own sense of self into focus, to 'say what she believed in.'

Even without factoring in their perspectives on art and culture, McCarthy and Brophy were already at a disadvantage as female intellectuals; echoing Brooke-Rose's sentiment, Sabrina Fuchs Abrams emphasises that the Anglo-American intellectual world following the Second World War was "predominantly male" (Fuchs Abrams ix). But, as a slew of recent studies have shown, cultural critics on both sides of the Atlantic were also characterised by a peculiar model of progressive politics. This was at once symptomatic of the conditions of wartime totalitarianism and the onset of the Cold War, and at the same time rooted in nineteenth-century thinking around democracy and national identity. William Lubenow has argued that the progressive culture of the twentieth-century public intellectual in the United Kingdom was indebted to "university and professional people

<sup>1</sup> Brophy's husband, Michael Levey, was director of the National Gallery from 1973-1986, and one of the foremost historians of the Italian renaissance; his 1966 study, *Florence: a History*, and 1967's *Early Renaissance* were both edited by Brophy.

**Commented [SR1]:** I only realised how odd this term must look after one reader pointed it out. It is a nod to McCarthy, who liked the word and used it in a number of places, including *The Stones of Florence* (describing "every [Tuscan] town and person" as "bent on achieving its own entelechy." It is a bit awkward to work a reference in here, so am happy to substitute the term for something like 'fulfilment' instead.

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in the nineteenth century”, who “formed liberal values and then used them to break the ‘frost of custom’ and to burst the ‘chains of authority’” (Lubenow 6), while John Dewey prefigured such a relationship in the 1930s, when he suggested that “the attainment of freedom” had driven America’s “political history” (Dewey 4). For Dewey, the particular emphasis that intellectuals (including himself) placed on individualistic models of self - whether in art or society - was a product of a liberal tradition in American thinking, where “the idea of freedom has been connected with the idea of individuality of the individual” (Dewey 4). In both cases, cultural criticism was indebted to a political agenda that emerged in the nineteenth century, which positioned ‘contemporary’ culture in direct opposition to the principles and structures of the past, and emphasized the individual’s freedom from tradition.

From this perspective, it is easier to understand why critics of this era conceptualized the role of the public intellectual as particularly concerned with promoting artistic practices that emphasized personal responsibility and bore a close relationship to the ‘lived experience’ of the contemporary people. This emerging strain of ‘modern’ artistic criticism was designed, in the words of Lionel Trilling, “to construct people whose quality of intelligence, derived from literary study or refined by it, would ultimately affect the condition of society in certain good ways” (Trilling, *Beyond Culture*, 186). Underpinning their desire for a new paradigm of fiction and criticism was a belief that, in the wake of the inexplicable violence that characterized the Second World War, contemporary society was uniquely in need of such a change. The ethical dimensions of their programme were impelled by the sense that at “perhaps at no other time has the enterprise of moral realism been so much needed” (Trilling, *Liberal Imagination* 221). As Trilling proposed, in one of the clearest enunciations of the ambitions of this liberal criticism, society needs “books that raise questions in our minds not only about conditions but about ourselves, that lead us to refine our motives and ask what might lie behind our good impulses.” On the one hand, art and literature could be powerful tools in bettering the individual, and helping them develop into a more sophisticated entity. On the other, intellectuals in the UK and the US argued that art should be leveraged to engender a greater level of freedom for society as a whole. As such, the post-war intellectual had an obligation not only to promote, but actively to shape the literary and visual arts, so that they were aligned with a narrative of progress that was indebted to political (rather than abstractly aesthetic) thinking.

Within this context of socially-conscious criticism, Brophy was not obviously out of place. Highly intelligent, and unashamed of being seen in that light, Brophy bent her sharp satiric wit to a range of subjects, from short-form essays on writers and novelists ranging from Katherine Mansfield and Henry James, to Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, to Patricia Highsmith and Henry Miller, to book-length studies of Ronald Firbank, Aubrey Beardsley and Mozart. By the 1970s, moreover, she was recognised as much for her passionate social essays as she was for her fiction, to the point that Leslie Dock could (attempt to) classify her as “proponent of human and animal rights who writes and speaks out in favour of vegetarianism, birth control for animals and birds, prison reform, freedom from censorship, and a change in attitudes toward marriage and divorce” (Dock 151-52). In fact her critical writing often elicited stronger praise than her fiction. In a cutting article in the *Spectator* in 1966, [novelist and](#) essayist Simon Raven argued that although all of her essays were “scrupulously and seriously written around a point which is of serious importance,” parts of her prose, which Raven associated particularly with her fiction-writing persona, amounted to nothing less than “dottiness almost beyond belief” (Raven 21). Raven resorted to an explicitly gendered distinction to try and explain what he saw as two distinct writing voices - “two hands at work.” In her critical voice, which Raven tellingly dubs “Brophy,” she is “an intelligent writer of clear and masculine prose, sensitive indeed to every shade of meaning and every twist of moral subtlety, but in the sum tough, incisive and direct,” while the writer of fiction, occasionally intruding into her essays, is “Brigid”: a “faddy and finicking prig.” That critics would use such language to reduce Brophy’s work actually helps to clarify why, despite her ‘scrupulous and serious’ work, she was excluded from major intellectual circles, and continues to trouble attempts to massage her into histories of post-war writing and criticism.

From Raven’s essay, it is clear that Brophy’s gender troubled male critics; despite moments of unadulterated praise, Raven also belittles the writer he dubs Brigid, describing the moments of ‘feminine’ prose as “asinine interruptions,” nothing more than the “fussing” of a “fatuous and opinionated wife”—alluding to the open secret of Brophy’s contributions to her [husband’s](#) writing. In other words (according to Raven), despite her best efforts, Brophy’s gender betrayed her, revealing her to be out of depth in a male world. The range of ideas her writing covered, moreover, seemed to exceed the mandate of the public intellectual. Chris Hopkins has observed the way her eclectic subject matter [have-has](#) limited readers’ abilities to classify her, for although “uniqueness,

originality, and creativity are recognized as distinct literary qualities”, Hopkins argues that “it is nevertheless essential for readers to be able to place those qualities within some kind of framework” (Hopkins 12). The same attitude underpinned Raven’s dismissal of her writing; Brophy “has been neglected” and marginalised because “her work is not easily categorized or characterized.” Most importantly, Brophy resisted the cultural narratives of progress and development - the expected subject of a public intellectual. As a writer who valued, even accentuated her cultural Irishness, she also resisted the nationalistic attitudes that underpinned the very position of being a public intellectual. While critics may have had trouble pinpointing exactly what it was about Brophy’s writing that made them uncomfortable, the subjects that provoked hostility in readers like Raven - masturbation, the rights of animals, and a rejection of private property - were all subjects that opposed liberal principles of development, whether through attending to the animal, rather than the human, through thwarting population growth, or by rejecting the capitalist principles that underpinned post-war liberal ideology.

Across the Atlantic, critical hostility towards McCarthy’s essays was much more openly predicated on her opposition to the idea of growth and development. In her interview with *Paris Review*, McCarthy described her novel *The Group*, then in the final stages of being written, as “the history of the loss of faith in progress, the idea of progress” (“Art” 68), and critics readily adopted this as image as a critique of McCarthy’s essays as well. In its published form, the novel - “a kind of mock-chronicle” - traced the lives of a group of eight young women following their graduation from Vassar College in 1933 until their reunion at a funeral in 1940. Although McCarthy compressed this chronology over the course of composition - shifting its original conclusion in the early 1960s first to “the inauguration of Eisenhower” in 1953, then to a date shortly before America’s entry into the Second World War - the contrast between the novel’s ostensible forward movement and its thematic interrogation of progress creates an ironic double register that is characteristic both of her writing and her position in American culture. Despite her profile as an outspoken and often acerbic critic of contemporary culture and criticism, McCarthy nonetheless maintained a prominent position inside the cliques of several major intellectual magazines, most notably the *Partisan Review*. But given how fluently she moved between the genres of autobiography, criticism, and fiction throughout her career, it should not be surprising that it quickly became a trope, when assessing her work, to note the difficulty of distinguishing invention from experience. This bivalent tension between inside and outside, progress and decline, underpins both



her own writing, and critic<sup>2</sup>s' reception of her work, helping to further explain why McCarthy and Brophy alike stood out from their male counterparts.

After her own graduation from Vassar College in 1933, McCarthy began a career that straddled literary, political, and cultural criticism, academic teaching, autobiography, travel writing, and literary fiction. The wealth of biographies McCarthy has inspired attests to the enduring fascination her personal life has held, particularly her Trotskyite beliefs, marriage to the critic Edmund Wilson, detailed correspondences with the Jewish intellectual Hannah Arendt, and long-standing (and public) feud with the dramatist Lillian Hellman. In one of many such intersections, Wilson was one of very few American critics to praise Ronald Firbank, a writer to whom Brophy was aesthetically indebted, and his status as a leading intellectual certainly gave McCarthy's credibility an early boost, just as Levey's did for Brophy. Of McCarthy's fiction, *The Group* was undoubtedly the most commercially successful work; however, the official classification of this and other of her books as novels has drawn attention from the way she deliberately challenged conventional generic structures, in ways that bear a strong comparison to Brophy's own genre-bending work. This has been compounded by her association with the dominant figures of post-war cultural criticism, particularly Lionel Trilling and Phillip Rahv, whose writings yoked a need for a particular strain of liberal imagination in American prose to a cultural narrative oriented squarely around progress - a critical confluence her own writing determinedly undermines.

In his scathing review of *The Group* in 1963, Norman Mailer astutely emphasized this discrepancy between McCarthy's prominence in liberal circles, and her resistance across fiction and essay to the liberal agenda. Casting her as America's "First Lady of Letters," an iconoclastic "Joan of Arc" who had assumed the role of "our saint, our umpire, our lit arbiter, our broadsword," Mailer suggests in mock disgust that the success of her novel may reveal that McCarthy had "conspir[ed] with the epigones," or that she was, herself, merely a hack (Mailer 1). Mailer's incredulity was no doubt exaggerated by the phenomenal success of *The Group*, which had inspired a slew of glowing reviews and would go on to top the *New York Times* best-seller list for nearly two years. But more significantly, he recognizes the same resistance to growth that Raven saw in Brophy's essays, suggesting that there was a tension between *The Group*'s apparent form and its narrative movement, declaring it to be "a book which could be said to squat on the Grand Avenue of the Novel like a shabby little boutique, a place which offers treasure in

the trash.” Mailer’s condemning tone should not obscure what is an astute observation: *The Group*’s overarching narrative, and individual chapters, resist the forward movement that was associated both with the novel and the role of the post-war intellectual, with Mailer’s language making it clear that he is judging McCarthy’s fiction against political standards of criticism as much as the ostensibly aesthetic criteria of form. Indeed, Mailer argues that the work repeatedly sets up an expectation of liberal conventions before rejecting them: “Let’s refine Comrade Mary’s problem a little further. A collective novel in which the most interesting character is missing, a collective novel in which none of the characters have sufficient passion to be interesting in themselves, yet none have the power or dedication to wish to force events. Nor does any one of the characters move critically out of her class by marrying drastically up, or savagely down” (Mailer 2).

[Mailer’s choice of emphasis here is not an accident; by ‘collective novel,’ he deliberately invokes a left-wing form of literary modernism particularly associated with John Dos Passos. The implicit critique—echoed in the way he addresses “Comrade Mary”—is that McCarthy’s novel orchestrates the lives of its characters ‘collectively’ to effect a larger political point. While I doubt many readers would associate \*The Group\* with the style of Dos Passos, Mailer’s critique does help pinpoint a central formal element of the novel: McCarthy imposes strict limitations on both her characters and their structural development. From this perspective the novels builds on the short story structure of McCarthy’s debut work, \*The Company She Keeps\*, by refusing to allow characters the kind of individual development that critics expected of the novel form.](#)

In Mailer’s eyes, the novel’s failure lay in this repeated structural bathos, promising a certain narrative arc, then failing to deliver. Cannily, he suggests that McCarthy was herself aware of this process, noting that she “is too much of an old pro not to see the odds”; he even suggests that she may be deliberately undermining audiences’ expectations, where “her characters will come from one class and make no heroic journeys to other classes, they will not look to participate in the center of the history which is being made, and they will be the victim of no outsize passion” (Mailer 2). While he does not endorse this strategy in any way, he does inadvertently provide an explanation for why McCarthy may have adopted it. Noting that the characters seem trapped “because they have neither the interest to break out of the cage of their

character, nor even the necessity,” Mailer provides a reading of the novel that links the lack of forward movement to a commentary on the restrictions of individuals.

Despite the evident hostility behind some of his word choices, in this reading Mailer did not misrepresent McCarthy’s values, either in fictional or social terms. Both her short fiction and her novels, especially *The Group*, emphasized the hypocrisy of a world that apparently granted women greater freedom, while forcing them into more limited and constrained psychological positions. It is in this sense that McCarthy imagined the work to be about a loss of faith in progress - for the work dismantles the ideology of Western freedom and democracy increasing the quality of life for the individual. The irony McCarthy registers, and which perhaps Mailer failed to recognize, is the attractiveness of containment. [As many critics, including Alan Nadel have noted, in the mid-twentieth century the idea of personal containment was linked to larger political narratives, derived from America’s response to the perceived threat of the Soviet Union. Driven by a preeminent concern with American security, the concept of the “containment narrative” originally referred to “U.S. foreign policy from 1948 until at least the mid-1960s” \(2\) where America would attempt to contain the progress of the Soviet Union from a distance rather than through direct engagement. Domestically, however, it became increasingly associated with uniformity and homogeneity, whereby “the virtue of conformity . . . became a form of public knowledge through the pervasive performances of and allusions to the containment narrative” \(4\). Thus, as I have argued elsewhere, although New York intellectuals like Trilling may have promoted a liberal model of individual freedom that prioritized growth and development, their allegiance to larger geopolitical narratives of containment ultimately amounted to coercion towards conformity.](#)

[By contrast,](#) McCarthy’s fiction and essays both prioritize a set of aesthetics that give a subject formal beauty and patterning, but which simultaneously resisted traditional narratives of development. In her *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, McCarthy quickly defines herself through a predominating quality: “a passionate love of beauty” (*Memories* 17). It is tempting to wonder whether McCarthy’s famous account of her own aesthetic growth influenced Brophy’s 1963 novel *The Finishing Touch*, set in an aesthetically heightened finishing school. Certainly McCarthy associated the aesthetic from an early age with a spiritual (rather than physical or political) regime, which was tied intrinsically to a sense

of unfairness. Explaining that her “ugly church and parochial school provided me with my only aesthetic outlet,” McCarthy emphasized that her sense of beauty was governed by - even defined by - the power structures through which she accessed it. Although it was through the church that she accessed the aesthetic, this was always contingent upon an external hierarchy; “equality was a species of unfairness which the good sisters of St Joseph would not have tolerated” (*Memories* 16). Rather than suppressing her desire for the aesthetic, these conditions instead instilled a simultaneous revulsion and attraction toward structures of power, so that when she “threw” herself “into it with ardor, this sensuous life,” to the point where although “a desire to excel governed all my thoughts,” she was still “much attracted by an order for fallen women called the Magdalens,” craving at once the position of prodigy and outcast.

Later, McCarthy developed a more nuanced appreciation for the possibilities offered by containment, which developed through reading Latin. Studying Caesar’s famously clipped style, she recalls “recogniz[ing] the beauty of an ablative absolute and of a rigorous code of conduct” (*Memories* 166). As her *Memories* relate, she went on to reject the Catholic Church and its demands, but her writing continued to be governed by a paradoxical desire for closure and compression, and a resistance to the hierarchies that perpetuate control and containment. In her critical and literary career, these hierarchies manifested in the form of the political narratives of a nationalistic United States, and even in *Memories*, the way that she figures religious containment is commensurate with political control. Paul Giles has argued that it is “within the formal design of her writing that McCarthy’s residual Catholicism operates at its most intangible but also at its most profound,” and this assessment could apply equally to Brophy’s own cultural Catholicism. But in keeping with her “passionate love of beauty,” McCarthy figured her resistance to political containment in terms of a personal resistance, directed by aesthetic judgment. At the end of her commentary on her religious growth, culminating in her rejection of Catholicism, McCarthy reveals that her resistance is based on an uncompromising sense of personal judgment: “I do not mind if I lose my soul for all eternity. If the kind of God exists who could doom me for not working out a deal with him, then that is unfortunate. I should not care to spend eternity in the company of such a person” (27). On the one hand, her resistance to political conformity enacted through her fiction invokes, implicitly, the same logic of resistance. But as with Catholicism, or Caesar, she has to concede to the allure of aesthetic enclosure.

Acknowledging precisely such a play between belief in progress on the one hand, and an understanding of the claustrophobia of its implementation on the other, Fuchs Abrams has argued convincingly that McCarthy's utopian novella *The Oasis* should be considered "a satire aimed at the abstract idealism of intellectuals" (Fuchs Abrams 57). Brophy's predominant tone across her essays for newspapers like the *Sunday Times* and *Saturday Evening Post* was likewise one of satire in an Irish, Swiftian tradition; she focused much more overtly, however on the hypocrisy of contemporary ideas of progress, arguing that freedom relies on social institutions that confine the individual, where women and animals in particular continued to be controlled by society behind a narrative of progressive freedom. Writing on the rights of animals, for instance, she observed that human rights only existed ~~as a consequence of~~ ~~in relief to~~ the lack of rights extended to animals, in that it is "only in relation to the next animal" that "civilized humans persuade themselves that they have absolute and arbitrary rights" (Brophy *Don't Never Forget* 16). In doing so, "humanity seems to have switched off its morals and aesthetics - indeed, its very imagination"; the act of asserting human rights, ostensibly a liberal triumph, came at the expense of the ethical treatment of animals. With a similar attention to the gap between progressive narratives and coercive behavior, Brophy pointed out that while the invention of contraceptives and the feeding bottle had created "a new psychological freedom" - where "a man can now be a mother if he wants to, and a woman needn't if she doesn't" (22) - society continued to pressure women into taking on maternal roles, while deriding men who chose to do so. It was from this perspective that Brophy attacked social institutions like marriage, and practices like the eating of animals or sexual monogamy: with an attention to the way that supposedly progressive narratives forced individuals into restricted roles.

Brophy explained the logic of such social oppression most clearly in an article simply titled "Women," originally published in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1963. She begins her indictment of her peers with an apparently conventional assertion that "women are free" (Brophy *Don't Never Forget* 22). But immediately she is forced to qualify this, drawing a distinction between the social narrative around women and the reality: although "they *look* free" and "even feel free," Brophy argues that "in reality women in the western, industrialised world today are like the animals in a modern zoo." Without obvious constraints on their education, employment, or social status, women are ostensibly free to do as they like; however, just as zoos continue to keep animals caged without bars and cages, "the barriers which keep [women] in are now invisible." Drawing

a comparison to the position of African-Americans across the Atlantic, Brophy points out that “to be officially free is by no means the same as being actually and psychologically free” (38-39). While she is clearly concerned with the continued psychological oppression of women in and of itself, what perturbs her more is the heightened anxiety created in women (and men) by the hypocrisy of maintaining that women are not limited in what they can do: “society can say ‘Look, no laws restricting women’ even while it keeps women rigidly in place by various zones of fierce social pressure” (39). In this respect, her essays form a response to McCarthy, engaged in the same work of revealing the confinement that lies beneath social progress.

Almost paradoxically, however, Brophy recognized, and was attracted to, the aesthetic qualities of containment and patterning; just like McCarthy’s, her novels reject conventional linear progression, and her praise or critique of other writers is often predicated on how well structured - how contained - their writing is. Nowhere is this more obvious than in her book-length study of Ronald Firbank, *Prancing Novelist*, in which Brophy emphasizes that Firbank’s greatest achievement as a writer was to circumvent the expectations of development, and instead craft works around “the logic of the design rather than the logic of narrative and characterisation” (*Prancing Novelist* 67). As this language suggests, her defence of Firbank is oriented around the patterning of his work, explicitly in contrast to the mainstream expectations of a particular kind of literary development. Indeed, her praise of Firbank draws together her aesthetic and social judgments, in a way that helps to explain their origins in Renaissance thinking. Making a distinction between art and science, Brophy contests that art does not “progress in the sense that science progresses” (80) along a steady trajectory of new discoveries and developments. She suggests that modern critics have fallen into the same trap as the early Italian art historian, Giorgio Vasari, whose *Lives of the Artists* presented, in Brophy’s view, a “vision (itself a false perspective) of the history of painting as a progress towards the Renaissance mastery of naturalistic representation” (77). Instead of a Vasarian, scientific model of progress, however, Brophy contends that great art should only be concerned with its own aesthetic completion, so that formal experimentation is only valuable in the way that Firbank’s was: as a way to craft work with a formal integrity and coherence, which to the untrained eye might appear conservative, rather than progressive. For Brophy, however, integrity implied a resistance to convention; which is to say, in the terms she used to introduce her study of Firbank, that “all good fiction is highly individual” (xiii).

Given the ostensibly contrasting values of their social criticism and writings on art and culture, it is not really surprising that McCarthy and Brophy tended to draw contemporary readers into making a similar mistake. On the one hand, both advocated for social equality, greater sexual and cultural freedom for women, and publicly criticized the Vietnam War. At the same time, both openly attacked their male counterparts for espousing a narrative of social progress, and worked fearlessly to expose the hypocrisy of claims that late twentieth-century society was 'more developed' than either historical societies, or non-western cultures. This, combined with their own prioritization of the aesthetics of containment, has led critics either to misunderstand their work as conservative, or simply to fail to position it in relation to the dominant model of public intellectual. Certainly, in the sense that they looked backwards to earlier aesthetic models to express their own values, they were Renaissance women, integrating the past into a contemporary mode of being. Perhaps more importantly, they privileged a sense of completion that, in their view, narratives of progress made impossible. Echoing Brophy's praise of Firbank, McCarthy explained this aesthetic in terms of integrity, which she illustrated through "Brunelleschi's architecture" (*Stones of Florence* 142) in Florence. His designs and buildings constituted "a species of wisdom, like Socratic and Platonic philosophy, in which forms are realized in their absolute integrity and essence; the squareness of square, the slenderness of slender, the roundness of round." A scientific or capitalist model of progress made such artistic integrity impossible - a narrative of continual development relies upon things remaining incomplete. From this point of view, imposing a narrative of progress onto, say, gender relations was to both ignore current gaps between the status of men and women, and to imply that there could never be true equality, just as valorizing literary experimentation was to devalue the quality that both prized most highly: formal integrity.

Following Susan Sontag's death, Charlotte Allen wrote a controversial piece titled "Feminist Fatale" for the *Los Angeles Times*, in which she argued that, although there was "no shortage of well-known male intellectuals," without Sontag, women lacked a representative in the field of public intellectualism. Although she is willing to concede that there are still "female intellectuals with stellar credentials," she maintains that they do not hold the status of 'public intellectual' because of their adherence to "ideological feminism," which "has ghettoized and trivialized the subject of women's writing." As many of Allen's critics have noted, she seems to be critiquing female intellectuals for failing to address major issues from the same perspective as men; their viewpoint is

“trivial” because it is informed by feminism. But it was precisely because of their ability to critique contemporary culture and aesthetics from an alternative – even contrarian – perspective that Brophy and McCarthy succeeded as public intellectuals. It is hard to tell what McCarthy would have made of the comparison that Brophy drew between their respective roles in the UK and the US- she had pointedly described Sontag as “the ersatz me” (Sontag, in Kiernan 537). But alongside their many other incidental similarities (not limited to their mutual fascination with psychoanalysis, and identification with an Irish heritage complicated by pronounced atheism), McCarthy and Brophy shared a sustained reverence for the art of the past, tied to Renaissance and Baroque ideals, that not only shaped their voices and subjects as writers of fiction, but formed the foundation for their social commentary and criticism of art. In aligning their fictional and intellectual voices along such idiosyncratic, insurrectionary lines, moreover, they opened a space within the broader critical discourse for other women to stand up as public intellectuals that is essential to understanding the status of women’s writing in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, precisely because they were not restricted to the same ideologies of progress and improvement.



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