

The Commercialization of Tradition in Mary McCarthy's *Birds of America*

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Abstract

Birds of America seems like a relatively straightforward allegorization of McCarthy's Eliotic leftism; in particular, the novel establishes a series of characters who mirror the main positions established in her Vietnam reporting. Hence, Rosamund Brown, a thinly veiled self-portrait, replicates much of McCarthy's cultural politics. She is the focus of the novel visits that Rosamund and her son made to Rocky Port, New England—an isolated cottage community that she envisages as one of the last remaining bastions of America's pre-industrial past. McCarthy's account of the Strategic Hamlets, demonstrate the impact of modernization on traditional folkways. The threat of modern mass society is that it effaces these species differences, creating a culture that is worldwide in scope and nowhere organically linked to its environment. Once this connection between human beings and nature is severed, ethics and aesthetics—the means by which human beings articulate their sense of belonging in the world—begin to disappear.

KEYWORDS: leftism, Vietnam reporting, cultural politics, modernization, commercial exploitation.

Hence, *Birds of America* is not really an expression of the Eliotic leftism articulated in McCarthy's nonfiction. Rather, it is a more complicated book about the humanist intellectual's underlying affinity with the celebration of modernization found in the mainstream social

the science of the 1960s. Predictably, Rosamund discovers that Rocky Port has been absorbed into the modern world economy and has become little more than a tourist trap. Residents now insist on affixing historical notices to their homes—at once marking their disconnection from their past and their willingness to market it. Rosamund nevertheless tries to revive and preserve the village's authentic New England traditions—ostensibly an act of resistance against the dissemination of mass culture. The other side of the novel's dialectic is represented by Dr. Small, a technocratic social scientist akin to the modernization theorists that McCarthy criticizes in Vietnam. He is a Panglossian optimist, who celebrates the process of modernization regardless of its effects on particularistic traditions. "Capitalism," he explains, "has shown itself to be the most subtle force for progress the world has ever known. In its pre-industrial phase, an insidious, awesome force. Boring from within the old structures, leveling, creating new dreams, new desires, and having the technical know-how and dynamism to satisfy them" (301–02). The novel's central scene with Dr. Small takes place in the Sistine Chapel, which he is investigating as part of a sociological study of mass tourism. Like Rocky Port, the Sistine Chapel has become a tourist destination; once a site of worship and the

expression of a particular culture, it has instead become an item of curiosity for international crowds of distraction seeking tourists.

Tourism thus exemplifies the process of modernization that Dr. Small celebrates and Rosamund abhors; by opening all parts of the world to commercial exploitation, it tends to make them all the same. The figure who mediates between these two positions is Rosamund's son, Peter, a young nature lover and political idealist with membership cards for various civil rights organizations. In the fall of 1964, he travels to Paris on a study abroad program and begins to distance himself from his mother's politics. He does this by embracing a universalistic, Kantian ethic similar to the one that modernization theorists such as Parsons believed was the cultural endpoint of the modernization process. "Behave as if thy maxim could be a universal law" (131), Peter repeatedly tells himself. However, he finds himself drawn back into his mother's orbit after several long discussions with Dr. Small. His distaste for modernity continually comes into conflict with his universalist ethics and political advocacy for social equality, and he eventually joins his mother's quixotic struggle against modern conveniences. The novel finally ends pessimistically, with Peter learning that the United States has dropped its first bombs north of the seventeenth parallel and that he may soon be drafted into the war. This event coincides with his near-fatal attack by a black swan at the Jardin des Plantes, which symbolizes for him that the natural order has been thrown into disarray. As he recuperates in a hospital bed, the spirit of Immanuel Kant visits him in a fever-induced hallucination. "Nature is dead, mein kind" (344), Kant tells him—the novel's apocalyptic last words. This pronouncement echoes McCarthy's concerns about the destruction of the natural environment and its effect on all ethical systems; she evokes the triumph of instrumental reason that, she argues in her reporting, is exemplified by the Vietnam War. However, *Birds of America*, in fact, parodies Rosamund's and thus McCarthy's cultural politics, disarticulating the connection between nature and tradition that animates their shared nostalgia for the premodern.

McCarthy's strategy for carrying out this satire is announced in the novel's epigraph from Kant: "to attempt to embody the idea in an example, as one might embody the wise man in a novel, is unseemly . . . for our natural limitations, which persistently interfere with the perfection of the idea, forbid all illusion about such an attempt." In the rest of this quotation, which McCarthy leaves out, Kant concludes by noting that such efforts cast "suspicion on the good itself—the good that has its source in the idea—by giving it the air of being a mere fiction" (*Critique* 487). Throughout, *Birds of America* illustrates this tendency for ideas to become "unseemly" when embodied in fictional examples; the novel's continual movement is from Rosamund and Peter's abstract ideas to their banal realization. Hence, much of the novel's comedy comes from Peter's application of the categorical imperative to insignificant ethical dilemmas—for instance, whether to clean the excrement out of his hostel's communal toilet. As in the Kant quotation, this example redounds on the theory it is supposed to illustrate. Peter realizes that the Kantian imperative gets stymied in this instance, since whether the dirty bowl even registers as an ethical problem is mostly a function of each resident's childhood training—an empirical factor supposedly irrelevant to pure practical reason. "Could humanity be divided into people who noticed and people who didn't?" Peter asks. "If so, there was no common world. That thought really depressed me. If there was no

agreement on a primary matter like that, then it was useless to look for agreement on 'higher' principles" (156).

McCarthy uses the same strategy to parody Rosamund's nostalgia for tradition. Hence, McCarthy frequently draws on culinary analogies to describe what is wrong with American society and the industrial mass culture it exports abroad. Modernization, in her account, is like a blender or food processor. Many of the long sentences in her Vietnam reporting try to imitate its effects:

The samples of U.S. technology that had been showered on the North were mainly in bomb form, yet the simplest Vietnamese could perhaps see a connection that eludes many American intellectuals between the spray of pellets from the "mother" bomb and the candy hurled at children in the South by friendly G. I.'s, between the pellets and the whole Saran-wrapped output of American industrial society which can no longer (at least this is my conclusion) be separated into beneficial and deleterious, good and bad, but has been homogenized, so that good — free elections, say—is high-speed blended with commercial TV, opinion-testing, buttons, streamers, stickers, canned speech-writing, instant campaign biographies, till no issues are finally discernible, having been broken down and distributed in tiny particles throughout the suspended solution, and you wonder whether the purpose of having elections is not simply to market TV time, convention-hall space, hotel suites, campaign buttons, and so on, and to give employment to commentators and pollsters. (Seventeenth 309–10).

This blended culture is McCarthy's restaging of the universalism touted by modernization theorists such as Parsons, Rostow, and Staley. Once again, it is a culture entirely dominated by instrumentalism, such that the good elements of the Western democratic tradition have been subordinated to the market economy. However, as in the case of Peter's application of Kantianism to toilet etiquette, this application of McCarthy's agrarianism trivializes the idea it is supposed to exemplify. In the middle of a failed effort to find tapioca pudding in local stores, Peter reflects, "in this sinister summer of race riots, church-burnings, civil-rights workers vanishing in Mississippi, in New York, a cop, off duty, shooting to kill at a Negro kid, the fact that tapioca pudding, his old love, had kicked the bucket ought not to matter. Yet if he said that to his mother, she felt he was abandoning her" (70).

Peter and Rosamund's conflict with the townsfolk thus displaces the conflict that could have taken place between Peter and Southern segregationists over the more burning issues of 1964. The triviality of this substitution is highlighted when Rosamund and Peter end up in prison on the last day of their visit. Rosamund infuriates her landlady by taking down the historical notice on her rented home in the midst of a commemorative jamboree, indicating that she will live in history rather than participating in a pageant. When the local constable demands that she put it up again, Peter has a chance to use the passive resistance techniques he learned from the civil rights groups on campus. The incident exemplifies the way in which many Cold War humanists' focus on mass culture distorted their perception of the era's more crucial problems of poverty and race discrimination. Even more radically, Rosamund's culinary experiment illustrates the sheer

incoherence of McCarthy's identitarian critique of modernity; in particular, it illustrates the impossibility of recovering a tradition that does not already register within itself a history of commercialization, technological processing, and cultural heterogeneity. Hence, when deciding what to cook from Fannie Farmer, Rosamund has trouble deciding what does and does not constitute a New World dish. She concludes that a dish "did not have its citizenship papers if it had been cooked in America for less than a hundred years" (32) and sends Peter on library research trips to determine when specific ethnic groups arrived in the country.

Rosamund, in other words, attempts to fabricate a tradition through an effort in artificial historicism that parallels Rocky Port's own attempt to catalog and market its historical past. This research effort will never recover an original culture born out of the people's relationship with their land; her own Puritan ancestors were migrants who brought foreign technologies and ingredients to New England, as did the Native Americans before them. The problem revealed by Rosamund's failure to recover an original American cuisine is thus the arbitrariness of any cultural politics that tries to distinguish between traditional and modern societies on the basis of their geographical particularism versus non-geographical universalism. This form of politics always ends up defining and inventing traditions, arbitrarily delineating which technologies and customs do and do not belong in them.

Hence, Rosamund reshapes the New England culture she constructs in her household. "She was strong for the traditional," Peter reflects, "and whenever she made an innovation, it became part of the tradition, something that had 'always' been" (27). This nostalgia for a tradition she can never inhabit highlights the fact that Rosamund, like all of the novel's other peripatetic intellectuals, is a tourist. She is in many ways the ideal consumer of Rocky Port—someone who takes seriously its claim to embody New England's past. Her problem is not that her demands for historical authenticity and cultural distinctiveness clash with Rocky Port's efforts to market itself. Rather, it is that she is too discriminating in these demands.

In terms of a distinction that Peter uses to separate himself from the other tourists in the Sistine Chapel, she is a "class," rather than a "mass" tourist (284)—a tourist who is aesthetically attuned to the place she visits as opposed to other, less educated and supposedly undeserving visitors. Class tourism, in other words, is a strategy whereby the educated tourist distinguishes herself from the masses who make every place look the same. However, as Peter realizes, mass tourism and class tourism are in fact inseparable; the promise of class tourism is essential to the ways in which tourist destinations market themselves:

There's a logical contradiction in the whole tourist routine . . . 'Oh God, tourists!' you hear them moan when they look around some restaurant and see a bunch of compatriots with Diners Club cards who might as well be their duplicates. Sort of a blanket rejection that, if they sat down and analyzed it, would have to include themselves. Only nobody does. They can't. Instead, in the Sistine Chapel, you start thinking of the reasons why you have the right to be there and all the rest don't. (294)

Once this distinction between class and mass tourism collapses, an even greater problem arises with Rosamund's critique of modernization. She is not only a consumer of class and therefore mass tourism. As a concert harpsichordist and musicologist who preserves and performs music from an extinct musical tradition, she is also a producer of it. Humanist intellectuals like Rosamund and McCarthy, in other words, inevitably market cultural products to a select audience of fellow intellectuals, thereby creating the illusion that they are class rather than mass consumers of a cultural tradition. Humanist intellectuals thus embody a paradox implicit in the kinds of tourism that Rosamund derides—although tourism makes all times and places look the same, it always does so in the name of preserving local differences and making them accessible to others. Rosamund, therefore, misses an important moment of self-realization when her landlady reveals that she is an avid fan of Rosamund's recordings. As in the case of Rocky Port's use of historical markers, the very urge to preserve tradition is a sign that one is irrevocably alienated from it and engaged in its destruction.

This implicit critique of tradition in *Birds of America* means that its apocalyptic conclusion, Kant's invocation of the death of nature in the face of the Vietnam War, opens itself to contrasting interpretations. The obvious interpretation, the one that corresponds to McCarthy's nonfictional statements about nature and ethics, is that human beings have destroyed nature and with it, the ontological ground for all ethics and aesthetics. This interpretation is suggested by the Kantian ethics that Peter expounds throughout the novel. In the Kantian system, the experience of natural beauty is supposed to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge of nature and practical knowledge of ethics—the respective domains of the first two critiques.

As Peter sums up in his hallucination, the beautiful things in the world prove "that man is made for and fits into the world and that his perception of things agrees with the laws of his perception" (343). Natural beauty, therefore, undergirds Kant's theoretical edifice. The problem, suggested by Kant's cryptic remark to Peter, is that nature has been so ravaged by human beings as to have become unrecognizable to them. However, the full context of Kant's warning suggests a different interpretation:

"Excuse me, sir, you have something to tell me, don't you?" The tiny man moved forward on the counterpane and looked Peter keenly in the eyes, as though anxious as to how he would receive the message he had to deliver. He spoke in a low thin voice. "God is dead," Peter understood him to say. Peter sat up. "I know that," he protested. "And you didn't say that anyway. Nietzsche did." He felt put upon as though by an impostor. Kant smiled. "Yes, Nietzsche said that. And even when Nietzsche said it, the news was not new, and maybe not so tragic after all. Mankind can live without God." "I agree," said Peter. "I've always lived without him." "No, what I say to you is something important. You did not hear me correctly. Listen now carefully and remember." Again he looked Peter steadily and searchingly in the eyes. "Perhaps you have guessed it. Nature is dead, mein kind." (343–44)

This conclusion, however, is complicated by *Birds of America's* meta-commentary on tradition. One of the difficulties involved in aligning the novel with tradition rather than modernity is highlighted by its title, which refers to Peter's Audubon field guide and to the pervasive presence of birds throughout the novel. For Peter, ornithology is one of

the last remaining descriptive sciences, one that seeks to obtain knowledge from nature through pure observation; "birds in nature were left to themselves, apart from human interference. The most you might do was to band them or coax them to show themselves" (167). In contrast, the modern sciences seek to meddle with and transform their subject matter. As Peter's first step-father, a nuclear physicist, explains: "taxonomy, useful in its day, had no place in the curriculum of a modern university, where biology and genetics were acting *on* Nature, like modern physics and chemistry, disturbing its inmost processes, forcing it to answer questions, smashing its resistance" (166). McCarthy's title similarly suggests that she wants to offer a naturalist's guidebook to the various species of Americans that Peter encounters in his travels, one that lets them remain in their natural habitat and merely observes their habits and manners. Kant, in other words, maybe proclaiming the death of nature in precisely the same way that Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God. With the development of modernity, we are forced to recognize that nature, like God, never functioned metaphysically in the way that we once thought it did. This seems to be the position enacted by McCarthy's novel.

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