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Arendt and McCarthy: Becoming Ourselves

When you entered the room and you were talking to her [McCarthy], something was always happening. She was so intelligent. And, you know, very eccentric in many ways. As I guess every person is when you really get to know them. Her mind was always full of something fresh and new. It was a great pleasure to be around her. I miss her terribly – every day.

Elizabeth Hardwick, quoted in Kiernan, 2000, 742

The past in the present

Mary Therese McCarthy, as she was christened, first met Arendt in Manhattan in 1944. She was in her early thirties and Arendt in her late thirties. McCarthy was still in the second of her four marriages, while Arendt was in her second and final marriage. McCarthy knew nothing at first hand of Arendt's 'old' Europe and Arendt was still working her way into McCarthy's 'new' America. Their differences of background were stark. But beneath those differences there were very important commonalities: both had, as children, experienced parental bereavement and upheaval; both had run away from home (and returned); both were young and aspiring female writers and intellectuals in what was a fiercely male-dominated world; both were also complicatedly at odds with their heritage – McCarthy as a lapsed Catholic and Arendt as a non-religious Jew. Arendt could hardly be described as an apostate, since she had not been brought up within the Jewish religious tradition. Nevertheless, the fact of her being a Jew was central to her identity, such that her experience of cultural bifurcation resonated with McCarthy's more direct experience of apostasy. Both, in short, were exposed from early childhood to life-changing events over which they had little or no control. Their friendship was framed by

this shared experience of vulnerability and uncertainty – but also by the different ways in which these two extraordinarily self-willed and intellectually courageous women coped with that experience.

McCarthy wrote about her youth and young adulthood in a number of books, some of which were a composite of feature articles for various publishing outlets, and one of which was published posthumously (McCarthy, 1992, 1957, 1987). Her novels – particularly her 1942 *The Company She Keeps* – are also a complex mix of autobiography and fiction. Her own past pressed heavily upon her because having been orphaned at a young age she had few verifiable reference points. She had to rely entirely on her own often hazy recollections, on conversations with her brother and on press cuttings to disentangle fact from false memory. There was always the nagging feeling that she may have blocked out or simply failed to notice what in retrospect might be important – or that she might have skewed her memory so as to make her past more palatable or bearable. This left her with both a great respect for facts and a predisposition towards fiction. If in her own past the distinction between fact and fiction was far from clear, then she needed the facts in order to get things straight and the fiction in order to fill in the gaps. So, tracing McCarthy's early years prior to her first meeting with Arendt is not simply a matter of establishing the facts, but of understanding how her deep-seated mistrust of what she took to be the facts was crucial to what she was and what she became. It is not the facts of the case but their fuzziness that shaped McCarthy. There were, for her, no clear and incontrovertible foundations to her life. Each memory was susceptible to endless interrogation and reiteration. She was forever drafting and redrafting herself.

McCarthy was the oldest of four siblings who were orphaned when she was six. Her parents both died within a week of one another in 1918. They were early victims of the influenza pandemic of 1918–19 that in its overall death toll probably rivals AIDS and the Black Death. The children were taken in by their paternal great aunt and by her new husband who lived in Minneapolis. McCarthy's 1957 *Memoirs of a Catholic Girlhood*, which is partly a composite of earlier autobiographical articles and partly a commentary on those accounts, reveals something of the abuse that she and her brothers suffered during this period and the impact of that abuse on her writing and her relationships. But over and over again she cuts into her narrative of these early years to interject

a note of caution regarding the veracity of her own account. With reference to her father, she writes: 'He read to me a great deal . . . and I remember we heard a nightingale together, on the boulevard, near the Sacred Heart convent. But there are no nightingales in North America.' Then a little later she adds: 'Many of my most cherished ideas about my father have turned out to be false'. What is noteworthy is the specificity of what she retrospectively suggests is a false memory: she remembers hearing the song of the nightingale 'on the boulevard, near the Sacred Heart convent'. The unreliability of her memory was tagged not to a sense of not-remembering, but to the specificity of what in retrospect she judged to be false memory.

However, McCarthy was in no doubt that she – and particularly her brother who was nearest to her in age – had been physically abused by her great aunt and her husband. The following incident occurred after a supposed theft by McCarthy of her youngest brother's toy – a tin butterfly: '[T]he boys were ordered to bed, and then, in the lavatory, the whipping began. Myers [the great aunt's husband] beat me with the crop, until his lazy arm tired; whipping is hard work for a fat man, out of condition, with a screaming, kicking, wriggling ten-year-old in his grasp'. The great aunt then 'took his place, striking harder than he, with a hairbrush, in a businesslike, joyless way' (McCarthy, 1957, 77). The abuse involved not only these extreme cases of physical violence, but also systems of control that included oppressive health, cleanliness and disciplinary regimes, together with a prohibition on reading anything other than a limited number of prescribed texts. 'The basis', wrote McCarthy, 'of my aunt's program for us was in truth totalitarian: she was idealistically bent on destroying our privacy' (McCarthy, 1957, 70). The regime was one of uncompromising efficiency: '[I]f we were forbidden companions, candy, most toys, pocket money, sports, reading, entertainment, the aim was not to make us suffer but to achieve efficiency . . . From the standpoint of efficiency, our lives, in order to be open had to be empty' (McCarthy, 1957, 71).

The tin butterfly incident was the culmination of six years during which McCarthy and her brother had on several occasions run away with a view to being admitted to an orphanage, a fate which seemed preferable to their life with their great aunt and Myers. On each of these occasions they were taken in by their paternal grandmother, who, while not condoning their actions, offered them brief sanctuary for a day or two before their enforced return. After the tin

butterfly incident McCarthy was taken in by her maternal grandparents on a permanent basis. McCarthy acknowledges her own uncertainty regarding the exact reasons for this move, but related it both to the tin butterfly incident and to the fact that in retrospect it would seem that her great aunt and her husband had in effect been embezzling the considerable sum of money that her maternal grandfather had been paying them to cover expenses relating to the children's upbringing. At this point the children were split up, with McCarthy and the brother to whom she was closest being sent to different boarding schools.

By the age of eleven McCarthy had lost both parents within a week of one another, been mentally and physically abused by those responsible for her care and protection, and been separated from her siblings. The abrupt change in her circumstances occasioned by her grandparent's intervention was the stuff of fairy tales: their house overlooking Seattle's Lake Washington was a world away from the life she had endured in Minneapolis. Her grandfather was a Protestant and her grandmother a Jew, but neither took their nominal affiliations particularly seriously. McCarthy moved from a situation that had taught her that survival depended on being red in tooth and claw to one in which order and civility were the prevailing norms. As her most recent biographer put it:

There were no onerous tasks to perform. No threats of corporal punishment. When she opened her mouth to voice an opinion, no one made fun of her. From the wallpaper on her bedroom walls to the linens on her bed, every item was costly and chosen with an eye to pleasing the senses . . . Her clothes were no longer threadbare . . . Never again would she be forced to eat a turnip or suck the white cord from the scrawny neck of some ancient boiled hen.

Kiernan, 2000, 44

But the past had left its mark on McCarthy. The torments of Minneapolis had set her apart and now she was separated from the siblings with whom she had shared that torment. She was isolated, watchful and unclear as to the events leading up to her seemingly miraculous relocation to Seattle. Her experience of life had been fatalistic in both its unpredictability and chronic uncertainty. Minneapolis had taught her that the only available choices – such as running away with her brother – were necessarily wilful and morally reprehensible. To be good one had to renounce choice and abandon agency. Moral agency was a contradiction in terms, in that morality demanded the

eradication of agency. 'Goodness' thereby became a foreign – or, at least, a highly problematic – concept. This perhaps partially explains McCarthy's lifelong predisposition towards controversy and self-assertion. To have the experience in one's formative years of being literally beaten into submission presumably leaves one either broken or determined to assert oneself at any cost. It also perhaps explains McCarthy's affinity with Arendt who was also to some extent an instinctive controversialist. But at eleven years of age, it simply set McCarthy apart in ways that both she and her grandparents must sometimes have found difficult. At that early age, as Kiernan (2000, 46) puts it, 'she had grown not only older but wiser in ways that the adults around her could not imagine and had no wish to explore.'

Although her maternal grandmother was Jewish and her maternal grandfather a Protestant, McCarthy had been brought up a Catholic. Her mother had converted to Catholicism after her marriage and she had attended a Catholic school in Minneapolis. Her grandfather clearly wished to honour his dead daughter's wishes while presumably hoping for some continuity in her educational experience. Consequently, she was enrolled in a convent school where she became a weekly boarder. The school was very different in both its ethos and its intake from her previous school and this seems to have intensified her sense of isolation and difference. In her second year – and not fully understanding the consequences of her actions – she announced that she had lost her faith. She was then sent to a coeducational Seattle public school, where she failed most of her courses, and then to a single-sex Episcopal boarding school. Here she was wayward and rebellious – narrowly missing expulsion on at least one occasion – but began to flourish educationally under the influence of teachers and fellow pupils who appreciated her distinctive qualities.

She remained ambivalent regarding the legacy of her early Catholic education and her Catholic upbringing. Looking back on her school in Minneapolis – possibly the worst school, in terms of academic prestige, she had attended – she wrote: 'Our ugly church and parochial school provided me with my only aesthetic outlet, in the words of the Mass and the litanies and the old Latin hymns, in the Easter lilies around the altar, rosaries, ornamental prayer books, votive lamps, holy cards stamped in gold and decorated with flower wreaths and a saint's picture' (McCarthy, 1957, 18). The same school had also given her a taste for meritocracy: 'Catholics of our neighbourhood

were children of poor immigrants bent on bettering themselves . . . There was no idea of equality in the parochial school . . . [E]quality, a sort of brutal cutting down to size, was what I was treated to at home. Equality was a species of unfairness which the good sisters of St. Joseph would not have tolerated' (McCarthy, 1957, 19).

At the same time McCarthy was acutely aware of the biases and prejudices implicit in the version of Catholicism to which she had been exposed in Minneapolis, and – crucially – the capacity of that version for generating intolerance, bigotry and self-righteousness: '[R]eligion is only good for good people . . . Only good people can afford to be religious. For the others, it is too great a temptation – a temptation to the deadly sins of pride and anger, chiefly, but one might also add sloth' (McCarthy, 1957, 23). If religion had provided her with a sense of beauty within the ugly and demoralising circumstances of her early life in Minneapolis, it had also provided her with a keen sense of the injustices that can flow from the assumption of religious authority. It had, in short, left her instinctively rebellious against all forms of authority, while at the same time desperately craving the attention of those in authority: a heady mix in any context, but – in the milieu of 1940s and 1950s New York – an intoxicating brew that was both intellectually challenging and erotically charged.

Complicated complementarities

From school McCarthy went on to graduate from Vassar College, New York, in 1933. In that same year she married Harald Johnsrud, an actor who also aspired to write plays. Three years later, in 1936, her first marriage ended, and in 1937 she became the lover of Philip Rahv, who was one of the founding editors of the highly influential literary journal *Partisan Review*, and who remained a lifelong friend. After leaving Rahv, she married the writer and critic Edmund Wilson in 1938 – seven years after the publication of his path-breaking (1931) *Axel's Castle* and just two years before the publication of his hugely ambitious (1940) *To the Finland Station*. Her marriage to Wilson – with whom she had one son, Reuel Wilson – lasted until 1946 when she entered a third and penultimate marriage to Bowden Broadwater.

When McCarthy first met Arendt in 1944 she was, therefore, although still in her early thirties, at the centre of the New York literary scene, with an ex-lover co-editing one of the major international journals, and a husband who had already gained a reputation as one of the most influential and innovative literary critics of his day. She was contributing to leading intellectual journals – *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *Harper's Magazine* and *The New York Review of Books* – and was part of the inner circle of *Partisan Review*. However, she was also nearing her second divorce and still struggling to establish her own literary and journalistic reputation in what was an almost entirely male-dominated culture. She had – rather like Rahel Varnhagen as depicted by Arendt – placed herself at the centre of a social, literary and intellectual circle in relation to which she was part parvenu and part pariah. She survived by working exceptionally hard, by carefully crafting her prose, but also by ensuring that she herself was noticed and that her opinions were couched in terms that would guarantee that they gained the attention of any gathering of which she was a part.

Not surprisingly she was seen by some as attention-seeking and flippant. Diana Trilling, who was married to the literary and cultural critic Lionel Trilling, was very clear in her views regarding McCarthy during this period of her life:

I took my politics too seriously to be amused by Mary. She was stupid politically. Irresponsible. She did harm. She presented herself to the world as the most responsible of people but she was irresponsible really. And she was awfully smug about her liberal bona fides. They don't impress me very much; they were too easily come by. I like a little hard thinking instead.

Quoted in Kiernan, 2000, 119–20

Interestingly, Trilling – born Rubin – was the daughter of Polish Jews, so when it came to 'liberal bona fides' she was speaking with some authority. Whether an upstart or an outcast, McCarthy was treated with caution by many and patronising disdain by others. Among the latter was Isaiah Berlin – diplomat and eminent British academic of Russian-Jewish origin – who pronounced the following succinct but withering verdict on her achievements: 'She was a great wit, but she was not a great thinker' (quoted in Kiernan, 2000, 119).

Arendt's initial response to McCarthy seems to have been not dissimilar. At a party in New York in 1945 – in the context of conversation about the hostility

of French citizens to the Germans occupying Paris – McCarthy said she felt sorry for Hitler who was so absurd as to want the love of his victims. The remark was ill-judged: another instance, perhaps, of McCarthy alienating others by seeking to impress them. Arendt was incensed, declaring herself to have been ‘a victim of Hitler, a person who had been in a concentration camp’. She then turned to Philip Rahv, at whose house the party was being held, and asked (no doubt rhetorically): ‘How can you have this kind of conversation in your home, you, a Jew?’ In fairness there may be a degree of self-dramatisation on both sides. After all, Arendt was in some ways as much a parvenu as McCarthy in the emergent celebrity culture of the New York intelligentsia, and, like McCarthy, needed to impose herself and her identity on the gathering. Only three years later – on a subway station platform after Arendt and McCarthy had attended a meeting together – did the two women overcome this early setback. According to McCarthy, Arendt simply turned to McCarthy on the platform and said: ‘Let’s end this nonsense. We think so much alike.’ McCarthy apologised for her original remark and Arendt acknowledged that there had been a degree of overreaction in her own response given that she had never been in a concentration camp but only in an internment camp in France (Young-Bruehl, 1982, 196–7).

What followed was a lifelong friendship that proved to be immensely important and mutually beneficial to both women. Ostensibly, at least, McCarthy was more a fox than a hedgehog, and Arendt more a hedgehog than a fox: McCarthy seemed to know many things, while Arendt knew one big thing. But Isaiah Berlin’s neat antithesis – referring to a line by an ancient Greek poet, Archilochus – is subject to the same criticism that he directed at McCarthy: strong on sharp wit, weak on complexity of thought (Berlin, 1953, 3). Arendt’s work does indeed suggest a big idea developed through very different texts and across several decades. But it also suggests an immense responsiveness to the boundless plurality in the world around her: a responsiveness that has more than a whiff of the fox about it. Similarly, McCarthy clearly came across as extremely foxy to many of her contemporaries, but she too had a trajectory and a project that was hedgehog-like in its single-mindedness. When Albert Camus wrote in 1958 ‘that a man’s work is nothing but this slow trek to rediscover through the detours of art those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened’, he might

well – in spite of the masculine pronouns – have been thinking of either Arendt or McCarthy (Camus, 1979, 26). Each, in her own way, circled round – and returned to – the same preoccupations that were grounded in their early experiences of the world.

They complemented one another in complicated ways. Arendt needed to understand the ‘new’ world that she had entered; McCarthy needed to understand the ‘old’ world from which Arendt had emerged. Each was in a sense the other’s shadow – perhaps, even, the other’s fantasy. As Carol Brightman points out in the introduction to their correspondence, theirs was ‘a friendship that border[ed] on romance, not sexual romance, but not entirely platonic either’ (AM, xxix). Repeatedly, they expressed the desire to be in one another’s presence; spoke of how much they missed one another and how much they were looking forward to one another’s visits; and signed off their letters with deep expressions of love for one another. There was nothing exclusive about the relationship – spouses and partners were included in many of the fond greetings – but clearly each took immense delight in being with the other. For McCarthy, in particular, knowing that Arendt was there – and being reassured that she was there – was of immense importance. But increasingly Arendt, too, relied on McCarthy for reassurance and human comfort, particularly after the death of her husband in 1970.

At one level – the level of utility – the friendship operated as a mutual support system within the highly competitive professional world in which they both operated. The support was rarely overt – for example, neither reviewed the other’s work or publically championed it – but may for that very reason have been more effective. Although overlapping, their networks were different and extensive. They were able to keep one another informed of what was happening or not happening across those networks; share confidential views and opinions regarding some of the key players and their relationships; encourage one another when the negative reviews rolled in and celebrate one another’s successes. A great deal in their correspondence is ‘gossipy’, but the gossip served the very important function of mutual advancement – and sometimes sheer survival – in the tough world of freelance journalism, reviewing and writing that they both inhabited.

At another level they simply took great pleasure in one another’s company. It is difficult not to see in their friendship an element of the mother–child

relationship: McCarthy finding in the older Arendt the pleasure of stability that she had lost with the death of her mother, and Arendt finding in the younger McCarthy the restlessness that she had experienced as an adolescent and towards which she felt a kind of protective sympathy. Of course, this dichotomy is no more useful than the fox-hedgehog dichotomy if pushed to its limit. But it reminds us that their shared experience of insecurity, isolation and uncertainty in early life impacted upon both their later lives and that no doubt it did so in complicatedly different ways. It was not only their complementarities but also their differences that provided the mutuality and reciprocity that each needed and in which each took pleasure. In the world in which each of them had grown up, 'need' and 'weakness' were in many ways synonymous: strength was equated with self-reliance. To be able to acknowledge within their own relationship their mutuality of need – while recognising each other's strengths and differences – was for each a supremely adult way of becoming strong together.

Being oneself is extremely difficult, particularly when – as in the case of Arendt and McCarthy – one becomes a public and to some extent controversial figure relatively early in one's life. But this is an aspect of intersubjectivity that we all experience and can therefore relate to: how to balance self-perception and the self as perceived by others. In the case of both Arendt and McCarthy the tension between the 'I' as subject and the 'me' as object must have been particularly acute. How can one 'be oneself' when the presentation of one's own self is reflected back as in a hall of mirrors? This was the question to which their lifelong friendship might be seen as an answer. Their friendship was about becoming themselves: each helped the other to become herself; each was useful to the other in the professional and social circles within which they moved; and, crucially, each took pleasure in the other. Each was a better person than she might have been had they not, on that subway platform, drawn a line under the past and moved on. Their new beginning was a friendship within which each was able to complement and strengthen the other.

'Workmanlike friendship'

McCarthy was particularly good – as someone for whom English was her first language – at picking up on Arendt's sometimes idiosyncratic use of English.

Arendt was writing in her third language – after German as her first, and French as her second – and at times she seemed to be using English words to bend themselves around concepts that were more readily available in her mother tongue. Of course, Arendt knew very well what she was doing in moulding the English lexicon to the conceptual requirements of her argument. But McCarthy – for whom language mattered a great deal – highlighted the occasional tensions between expressive and communicative intent in Arendt's use of English.

Why, for example, in the piece on Walter Benjamin collected in *Men in Dark Times*, did she deliberately use a phrase such as 'the consistence of truth,' when the word 'consistence' jarred and the sense so obviously required the term 'consistency': 'I don't know what this means – consistency in the sense of firmness, thickness density or in the logical sense of agreement or connection, absence of contradiction? . . . In a recipe, you say "Stir until the mixture is of the right consistency." . . . Such a key term ought to be pinned down for the reader' (AM, 224). The fault, McCarthy tactfully added, probably lay with the translator of her piece (which had originally been written in German and translated by Harry Zohn) rather than with her own usage.

Arendt's reply showed no signs of defensiveness or of any collusion in shifting the blame to the translator of the piece. The bulk of her reply dealt with other matters and when she turned to McCarthy's comments on this particular work she simply stated that she was 'very happy about your comments'. She brushed aside the idea that it was a fault in translation, pointing out that this was the one piece in the entire volume that she had rewritten for the English edition. So, as she put it: 'consistence versus consistency is my fault'. Picking up on the homely culinary metaphor, Arendt repeats her originally intended meaning: 'I meant "stir until the mixture is of the right consistency" and used "consistence" because consistency is usually in the sense of logical consistency'. She had, as she put it, succeeded in convincing her editor and the copy-editor of this idiosyncratic usage 'probably because neither ever read a cook book' (AM, 232).

In the same letter McCarthy had provided Arendt with a very open and honest response to *Men in Dark Times*. It was, she said, 'a series of fairy tales' of the personages depicted; it was 'maternal' towards its subjects; it was German and had made her think about 'how you/they are different from us'. It expressed

a particular notion of ‘workmanly friendship, of apprentices starting out with their bundle on a pole and doing a piece of the road together. All this gave me much pleasure, as well as surprise.’ But it was this notion of ‘workmanly friendship’ that, for McCarthy, gave this particular work a distinctly Germanic feel: ‘It’s the only work of yours I would call “German”’. Again, Arendt only slightly demurred. She was not sure why McCarthy saw the book as ‘German’, but she agreed ‘about the fairy tale quality of the portraits’. She agreed with her point about the portraits – or ‘silhouettes’ as she preferred to call them – depicting a particular kind of ‘workmanly friendship’. But – she maintained – ‘I do think about people in these terms’ (AM, 225).

In other words, Arendt tended to see people as emblematic of human qualities that might be inferred from their particular dispositions; and she saw the particular people she had portrayed – or ‘silhouetted’ – as emblematic of the qualities and dispositions necessary for ‘workmanly friendship’. It is ironic that Arendt was spelling this point out to McCarthy, whose full and generous response to the style and spirit of her friend’s work was emblematic of precisely those qualities and dispositions. Every writer – particularly one working in her third language – needs a keen critical ear for the way in which the words sound, how they hang together in meaningful conjunction, or jar, and how they are received within the echo chamber of the mind. Writing, as Arendt knew, is expressive and transgressive. But it is also, as McCarthy knew, communicative and subject to conventions. You can and must, as Arendt knew, make language your own – but you must also, as McCarthy was well aware, have respect for its strictures. Not to put too fine a point on it: rules matter.

McCarthy fulfilled her role of ‘workmanly friendship’ through what at times feels like a kind of exasperated pedantry. But what fellow writer worth her salt would not have responded with gratitude to McCarthy’s nagging reminder of the requirements of our necessarily down-to-earth trade: ‘Restrictive clauses are always set off by commas. The distinction between which and that hasn’t always been made in English, and in the old days the shift from one to another was often determined by euphony ... But today the distinction is more rigorous. Exceptions are made when the “that” could be distinguished from the other kind of “that” ...’ (AM, 121). And so this lesson in the niceties of linguistic usage continues (in this case as a response to the manuscript of the concluding chapter of Arendt’s *On Revolution*):

Is your translation of Livy right? I'd think very tentatively, that the 'quibus' indicates that he means that a war is just to those for whom it is necessary, which gives a different shade of meaning. As for 'les malheureux sont la puissance de la terre', words fail me, but I think you could do better. 'The poor are the earth's might'? No. 'The poor are the mighty on the earth'? 'The wretched are the mighty on earth'?

AM, 122

This is an object lesson in 'workmanly friendship' – and Arendt understood and took it as such. For her part, she understood and acknowledged that McCarthy's best-selling novel, *The Group* – eleven years in the making and so very, very different from Arendt's own oeuvre – was 'beautifully written (the inner balance of the sentences is extraordinary) and often hilariously funny' (AM, 145). (Only a prose writer of consummate skill could set the tone so beautifully and wittily as McCarthy does in the opening sentence of that novel.) If Arendt was the supreme architect of big ideas, McCarthy was a superb craftsman for whom Arendt had great respect. Neither was unduly in awe or disparaging of the other. Each took pleasure in the achievements of the other – the hedgehog settling down quite comfortably with the fox. It was as a result of this deep companionability that McCarthy was able to bring to fruition Arendt's posthumous *magnum opus* – her unfinished *Life of the Mind* – and, in so doing, fulfil the final duties of 'workmanly friendship'.

Strength and fragility

Just as McCarthy understood some of the linguistic pitfalls that Arendt ran the risk of toppling into, so Arendt foresaw some of the emotional hazards towards which her friend – prior to her fourth and final marriage – seemed on occasion to be heading. While showing such a clear sighted, sharp witted and – some would say – cynical attitude towards human and sexual relationships in her fictional work, McCarthy displayed in her intimate relationships with men a marked tendency towards vulnerability, impetuosity and – some would say – lack of judgement. Much the same might have been said of Arendt prior to her marriage to Blücher. Arendt, in other words, knew where McCarthy was coming from. But Arendt's foresight was couched – and, it would seem,

conceived – in the spirit not of prudishness and censoriousness but of prudence and circumspection. Again, it was an expression of ‘workmanly friendship’ – ‘of apprentices . . . doing a piece of the road together’ (AM, 225).

A fairly early instance of Arendt’s steady influence – ten years into their friendship – relates to a period during which McCarthy’s third marriage was coming under intense strain. In 1955, while in Paris, McCarthy suffered a miscarriage of the child she had conceived with her then husband, Bowden Broadwater. Shortly after the miscarriage and the temporary rift with Broadwater that followed, Arendt flew to Venice to be with her friend, with whom she then travelled to Milan to a conference where Arendt was delivering a lecture. In the aftermath McCarthy became entangled in a relationship with John Davenport, who proved to be both allusive and deceitful. Travelling to Italy by way of London with the express purpose of meeting up with Davenport, she discovered from a mutual acquaintance that Davenport had lied to her about his family connections and had entirely misrepresented his own standing within the professional and social circles in which he mixed. The mutual acquaintance – Mr Hughes, whom McCarthy had been led to believe was Davenport’s cousin – put McCarthy straight.

Shortly after her meeting with Hughes – and having arrived in Italy – McCarthy reported to Arendt her version of the conversation:

‘Cousin? Did he tell you that?’ and he laughed, rather irritably. ‘I’m not his cousin. I’m no relation to him,’ I looked absolutely stunned, and he went on, in a hesitant way. ‘I think I had better tell you that John is a pathological liar.’ Well, Hannah, that was how it started. His ancestry. All that was lies about him and his ‘gentle birth’ . . . Then there was the drinking. It was much worse, said Hughes, than I could possibly imagine . . . There was nothing much you could do for him, Mr Hughes said, because of the lying, you never knew where you were with him. He also stole. Books and small objects.

AM, 45

McCarthy’s account ended on an even more serious note – serious, that is, for McCarthy’s reputation and social standing (this was, after all, 1957). McCarthy had been compromised: ‘He *had* talked about me, though not to Hughes; other people had told Hughes about it and said he ought to be stopped from talking so about a married woman. The fortunate thing, said Hughes, was that he was known to be such a liar that in this instance no one believed

him' (AM, 46). The emphasis on the 'had' suggests that McCarthy had half anticipated this betrayal of their intimacy. Somewhere between London, where she had met Hughes, and Italy, where she wrote to Arendt, McCarthy had crafted a story and, in crafting it, no doubt partially distanced herself from its revelations. But the rawness remained in the sense of humiliation that emerges in her account and in her fear that Davenport's boasts might, in spite of Hughes' reassurances, be believed – or that she might be tainted by association.

Arendt's response is well pitched. McCarthy's husband – Bowden Broadwater – had been round to Arendt's and Blücher's home the previous Sunday and Arendt tells her friend about the gathering and says 'he seemed to be in very good shape and I liked him' (AM, 48). Having thereby established – albeit implicitly – that her letter was not about 'taking sides', Arendt focuses on McCarthy's account of her discussion with Hughes and his revelations regarding Davenport. In her letter she manages – through the kind of humour she no doubt shared with McCarthy – to steady her friend while not demonising Davenport. In putting Davenport in his place she employs gentle satire rather than the melodramatics of moral condemnation and thereby offers McCarthy an alternative perspective on both Davenport and the humiliating and anxiety-inducing situation in which she found herself:

Mary, dear, I am afraid you came in too close a contact with the English variety of the 'lost generation' – which apart from being a cliché is a reality ... [T]o lie about one's origin and to play the aristocrat in England is, it seems to me, as much satire on the English and amusement about their standards as it perhaps is also the attempt to lie yourself into something you are not.

AM, 48–9

Arendt then goes on, in similar vein, to suggest that Davenport and his ilk are not particularly good liars. They lie about facts rather than feelings and so can all too easily be found out. Perhaps, suggests Arendt, Davenport wanted to be found out. She even comes close to suggesting that there may have been a latent goodness in Davenport in his tacit acknowledgement that what 'is really not permissible is to drag other people into one's own amusements ... So, you had to be frightened away' (AM, 49). Arendt acknowledges that there was 'a great deal of cruelty in all this', but that the cruelty might have been an expression of love in that he was protecting her from himself: '[Y]ou can't expect somebody who loves you to treat you less cruelly than he would treat

himself'. Arendt manages to salvage a modicum of respect for Davenport (his 'cruelty' may have been a kind of inverted 'love'), while at the same time acknowledging McCarthy's good luck – and better judgement – in escaping from this potentially destructive relationship (AM, 49). Arendt's cool and measured response endorsed her friend's decision to end the relationship, while leaving her with a sense of self-respect: the man McCarthy had fallen for was not right, but not all bad; she, in falling for him, had not been a complete fool and simpleton; they were not right for one another, but it was time to move on.

McCarthy's marriage to Broadwater was by now under immense strain. Two years later – in 1959 – he flew to Europe with McCarthy's son Reuel to join her for a holiday tour of Vienna and Prague. From there they accompanied her to Poland on the first leg of a State Department trip. They were met in Warsaw by the public affairs officer at the US embassy, James Raymond West. Before Bowden and Reuel returned to New York a fortnight later, West had already told McCarthy that he wanted to marry her. He too was married so the situation was complex on both sides. By the following October McCarthy was anxiously pushing for a divorce, Broadwater was resisting her demands, and Arendt was reluctantly being drawn into the increasingly entangled and bitter relations between McCarthy and her husband. Again, Arendt makes no attempt to pass judgement on her friend's actions. Instead, she seeks to mediate between McCarthy and Broadwater and to help each see the other's point of view.

In response to a telephone conversation in which McCarthy insisted that her marriage was over and that she wanted a swift divorce, Arendt wrote to McCarthy explaining that she had spoken with Broadwater and said to him: 'If you give her the divorce *now*, you will still be friends, if not, you will embitter everything unnecessarily'. She then went on to offer very similar advice to McCarthy: 'If you start proceedings now against his wishes you will have to take into account that he will try to make things harder at every single step . . . You will only have made an enemy – something which he is not now' (AM, 98). Having appealed to Broadwater to compromise, she then made the same appeal to McCarthy – and in both cases the appeal was based on the desirability of retaining friendship. Marriages end and desire fades, but friendship can and should endure.

Responding by letter, McCarthy insists that she 'is not going to accept the notion of waiting on Bowden's pleasure' (AM, 99). She adds: 'I am more deeply in love with Jim than ever and vice versa, and it is simply too ridiculous for us to be the passive foils of other people under the circumstances' (AM, 100). In reply, Arendt points out the obvious – namely that her estranged husband 'is not only not omnipotent but utterly powerless'. It is, she adds, precisely under these circumstances of utter powerlessness that people 'dream up some possibilities of power'. As to any suggestion that she should withdraw her friendship from Broadwater because of McCarthy's enmity towards him, Arendt is quite clear regarding the ethics of friendship:

I talked to him as a friend and I did not lie. For me the fact is that you brought him into my life, that without you he would not have become – not a personal friend which, of course, he is not – but a friend of the house, so to speak. But once you placed him there, you cannot simply take him away from where he is now.

AM, 103

Broadwater had become a friend: not a friend like McCarthy, but a friend nevertheless, someone welcome in the home. Such friendship could not simply be set aside. It demanded at the very least a certain duty of care and a suspension of any easy recourse to judgement: 'As long as he does not do something really outrageous which he has not done so far and really turns against you which he has not done either, I am not going to sit in judgement'. She points out the obvious: 'That his life is in ruins is quite obvious to anybody who is willing to have a look at him and his situation'. She presents McCarthy with the worst possible scenario, while absolving her of responsibility for that unlikely scenario should it occur: '[I]f he were to commit suicide which, I think, is not probable but not altogether impossible either, I would be the first to tell you that you are not to blame' (AM, 103). Towards the end of the letter, she pushes the argument further: '[I]t strikes me that you can forget so easily that you trusted him enough to be married to him for fifteen years ... [I]t seems to me rather obvious that you both are victims of your own, self-chosen past' (AM, 104).

It is a tribute to McCarthy that she accepted her friend's blunt appraisal of the situation as an expression of friendship. Just as McCarthy pulled back and provided a 'workmanly' perspective on her friend's stylistic idiosyncrasies,

so Arendt pulled back and provided a ‘workmanly’ perspective on her friend’s predicaments and entanglements. Each provided the balance and circumspection, the ballast and sense of proportion – the common sense – that the other needed and at times lacked. Arendt was headstrong in her prose – McCarthy reined her in; McCarthy was impetuous in life – Arendt pointed out the pitfalls. Together they made a good – if highly unlikely – team.

Common sense

It was on the subject of common sense that their correspondence first took philosophical wing in a letter written by Arendt in 1954. Developing ideas that would be elaborated more fully in her 1958 *The Human Condition*, she argued that common sense is crucial because it constitutes ‘a kind of sixth sense through which all particular sense data, given by the five senses, are fitted into a common world, a world which we can share with others, have in common with others’ (AM, 23). Common sense can be lost through introspection or what Arendt called ‘the logical faculty’. Both involve a retreat from the world into either introspection or objectification. For Arendt the world is neither entirely ‘in our heads’ nor entirely ‘out there’. It is the intersubjective space within which we relate to one another through our five senses – hearing, sight, smell, taste and touch – and in so doing constitute our common world. Common sense was, for Arendt, vital to that process: lose it and ‘there is no common world any longer’ (AM, 23).

Since we acquire common sense – as Arendt understood it – neither through internal dialogue with ourselves nor through the application of technical rationalism, its acquisition necessarily relies on what happens between people. Common sense, in other words, is a *practice* that requires a discursive tradition to ensure its sustainability: a tradition that relied for its continuity on conversation, correspondence and mutual commitment. We cannot *do* common sense in isolation, which is precisely why we designate it as *common*. Nor can we reduce it to a technique or method that is independent of social and cultural context. Without associative frameworks – such as institutions, families and friendships – common sense cannot come into play; conversely,

without the interplay of common sense, such frameworks lose their associative potential and become either dysfunctional or chillingly bureaucratic.

Sophia Rosenfeld (2011) has argued that Arendt is central to our understanding of the 'political history' of common sense, since, for her, common sense provided 'a foundation and goal for a politics that began with the active participation of "the people" in community making'. It thereby 'set the stage, at least potentially, for true democracy' (248). Unlike ideology, which aims at control through homogeneity and the eradication of human difference, common sense 'is ultimately a noncoercive but vital form of social glue suitable for a pluralist and talkative world'. It is 'the ground on which true democracy forms and the product that true democracy creates' (252). Arendt thereby 'provided her readers with a vision of a kind of participatory democracy in which the common sense of ordinary folk could accomplish wonders' (254): the kind of participatory democracy in which people could become themselves, achieve their potential, and flourish as both persons and as citizens.

The correspondence between Arendt and McCarthy provides ample evidence of the cultivation of common sense through the continuity of friendship. Carol Brightman, in the introduction to the Arendt-McCarthy correspondence, which she edited, writes that McCarthy had told her in 1989 (the year of her death) that 'common sense . . . was something she and Hannah had aplenty, contrary to what most people might think, "because strangely enough it is very unconventional. Conventional people," she insisted, "usually have absolutely zero common sense"' (AM, xxii-iii). The correspondence also shows how their common sense was mutually beneficial, with one providing the necessary resources of common sense in those situations where the other lacked those resources. That is how common sense – and friendship – work; or, rather, what makes for 'workmanly friendship'.

Indeed, it is difficult to see how McCarthy would have managed her life had it not been for Arendt's steadying influence at crucial junctures. Similarly, Arendt's capacity to cope with the highly charged environment of New York intellectual society – not to mention the Eichmann trial and its aftermath and the death of her husband in 1970 – owed a great deal to the emotional support, gossipy insights, streetwise savvy and political *nous* of McCarthy. Each was – when the chips were down (to use one of Arendt's trademark phrases) – willing to need the other and to acknowledge that need. Neither equated need with

neediness or with dependency. They were strong and, as McCarthy pointed out, ‘unconventional’ individuals who were not afraid of needing one another – and who, by seeking to meet one another’s needs, grew and flourished in their respective personal and professional fields.

The capacity to accommodate mutuality of need is one of the hallmarks of genuine friendship – and, indeed, of any genuinely democratic politics. The emphasis here, of course, is on *mutuality*. If the need is entirely one-sided – and remains so – ‘friendship’ may not be the appropriate term to apply to the relationship in question. But a friendship in which neither friend was able to trust the other sufficiently to express her or his need would be a threadbare affair; just as any democracy that labelled those in need as feckless scroungers would undoubtedly be in a sorry state of democratic decline. The assumption that meeting other people’s needs in some way contributes to their neediness is a fallacy. To address the needs of the other – on the other’s terms – is to open up the possibility for human growth and development, which in turn opens up the possibility of mutuality and reciprocity. That is the premise upon which genuine friendships and strong democracies are based.

But the tenor of these remarks is not the tenor of Arendt’s and McCarthy’s correspondence. They did not analyse their relationship or use it to conceptualise – or reconceptualise – friendship. They just got on with it. This again may tell us something about the nature of friendship: friendships are not the application of some theory of friendship, nor do they rely on an ongoing reflective meta-dialogue between the friends regarding the nature of their friendship. Friendships, in the main, do not have to explain or explore the deep codes of friendship upon which they are based. There is a great deal that is appropriately and courteously *implicit* in friendship. What matters – or mattered in the friendship between Arendt and McCarthy – is the continuity and, at the last, the sense of dogged duty, that makes possible the shared repository of memory and experience that constitute the strong lines of that continuity.

Duty beyond death

On receiving a telegram from Arendt telling her that Blücher had died the previous day, McCarthy immediately flew from Paris to New York. It was

November 1970. Blücher had been seventy-one when he died, and Arendt was just sixty-four. McCarthy was fifty-eight. The significance of age differentials – and, indeed, of how age matters – shifts over the course of a lifetime. Perhaps the age gap between Arendt and McCarthy gained a different significance now that Arendt was widowed, but there is little evidence to suggest that this was the case. Arendt – not in good health herself, newly widowed and with a punishing schedule of public lectures – no doubt felt her age. But McCarthy was pushing herself to the limit in her various writing assignments – literary journalism, coverage of Vietnam and Watergate, not to mention her earlier forages into Italian art history – and she too must have been feeling her age (see McCarthy, 1956, 1959, 1970, 1974a, 1974b). They were both getting older.

Four years later in 1974 Arendt suffered a heart attack while delivering a lecture in the highly prestigious Gifford Lectures at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland. Again McCarthy flew from Paris to be with her in the hospital where she was first placed in the intensive care unit. Following Arendt's heart attack and now back in Paris, McCarthy moved into common-sense mode, advising her friend on what she understood to be an appropriate health regime. Her tone was not unlike the one she had adopted when focusing on Arendt's use of written English: straightforward, slightly schoolmarmish, but as always well meaning, down-to-earth and useful. 'Please, now, my dear', she writes to Arendt, who is still in hospital, 'obey the doctor and direct your *will* to recuperation rather than to resistance. And enjoy at least the rest, enforced though it is'. No doubt aware that Arendt had resumed smoking as soon as the oxygen tent was removed, and anxious that she may have been resisting the advice offered by medical and nursing staff, McCarthy added: '[N]o doctor, I presume, would prescribe an agitated life, two packs of cigarettes a day, and running while carrying heavy objects'.

Of course, it has its funny side: McCarthy of all people lecturing Arendt on how to behave. But McCarthy *cared* – while, at the same time, being aware that her expressions of care may be missing the mark or simply open to misinterpretation. Moreover, she herself was in an agitated state following some less than favourable reviews of her most recent novel *Birds of America* and her more recently published works of non-fiction, *The Mask of State* and *The Seventh Degree*, on Watergate and Vietnam (see McCarthy, 1971, 1974a, 1974b). So when – five months later and following a meeting between

them – Arendt did not turn and wave to her friend prior to walking through the airport departure gate to board her plane for New York, McCarthy became twitchy: ‘It was sad to watch you go through the gate at the airport without turning back. Something is happening or has happened to our friendship, and I cannot think that in noticing this I am being over-sensitive or imagining things. The least I can conjecture is that I got on your nerves’ (AM, 364). McCarthy cared enough – after twenty-five years of friendship – to show her own vulnerability. But there is also in the tone of the statement a sense of having been slighted – a tone, that is, of injured pride that stops short of blame but is nevertheless mildly accusatory.

Arendt replied immediately: ‘The notion that you would ever go [*sic*] on my nerves never crossed my mind. I do not know why I did not turn back at the airport; I was very sad, your notion of my splendid solitude notwithstanding. I am of course lonely as everybody would be in my situation.’ Her tone then shifts slightly. She is clearly not in a mood to appease her friend and turns the same tone of injured pride back on McCarthy: ‘You may be right or wrong in being suspicious of your friends, but you could not very well be suspicious of *me* – or could you? And what have I done to provoke that?’ The subtext is clear enough: if your pride has been injured then so has mine! But then the tone shifts again as Arendt reassures McCarthy of her love: ‘For heaven’s sake, Mary, stop it, *please*. I say that of course for my own sake and because I love you, but I think I also may say it for your sake’ (AM, 364–5). McCarthy cannot resist in her next letter to scratch away at the sore – ‘I just thought you were cross with me about all sorts of minutiae, as though whatever I did or suggested doing rubbed you the wrong way’ (AM, 367) – but the incident was soon overtaken by the rich exchange of experience and opinion that characterised their correspondence as a whole.

Nevertheless, the incident does reveal the complementarity of strength and vulnerability in both women. It also shows how McCarthy in particular wanted – and needed – to do right by Arendt. Her friendship with Arendt had been the still point in the emotional turmoil of making her way from her second marriage through to her final stable and satisfying marriage with West. She no doubt had a great deal to beat herself up about with regard to these failed marriages and her other well-publicised affairs. Her celebrity status – as author of novels that by the standards of the time were risqué, of

autobiographical accounts that were raw and uncompromising, and of non-fiction that was highly critical of government policy – had provided her with financial independence and public recognition. But no doubt it also confirmed the negative perception she had of herself in her more insecure moments: sharp rather than intelligent, contra-suggestible rather than seriously critical, a bit of a parvenu. Her friendship with Arendt, on the other hand, provided her with a context within which being herself and being good were not mutually exclusive but at best mutually supportive.

So, every other Sunday Arendt and McCarthy talked on the phone, Arendt mostly in New York, and McCarthy mainly in Paris. Their talk went on and on – sustaining and sustained by their friendship – up until 4 December 1975, when Arendt suffered a fatal heart attack in her New York apartment. The funeral was held at Riverside Memorial Chapel, New York. During her oration, McCarthy declared that Arendt's self-imposed task had been:

to apply thought systematically to each and every characteristic experience of her time – *anomie*, terror, advanced warfare, concentration camps, Auschwitz, inflation, revolution, school integration, the Pentagon Papers, space, Watergate, Pope John, violence, civil disobedience – and, having finally achieved this, to direct thought inward, upon itself, and its own characteristic processes.

Quoted in Brightman, 1993, 589–90

At the time of her death Arendt was two-thirds of the way through her final work, *The Life of the Mind*. She had completed the first two sections on 'thinking' and 'willing' (which had formed the basis of the first series of the Gifford Lectures delivered in Aberdeen the year before), and the notes for the final section – 'judging' – lay on her desk with the first page of the final section of this hugely ambitious work still in the typewriter. McCarthy put aside her own half-finished draft of her next novel *Cannibals and Missionaries* (finally published in 1979) and began the personally demanding and intellectually arduous task of editing and annotating this final work of her friend. In doing so, as she pointed out in her 'editorial postface' to that work, she was maintaining the dialogue:

It has been a heavy job, which has kept going an imaginary dialogue with her, verging sometimes, as in life, on debate ... I do not think I shall truly

miss her, feel the pain in the amputated limb, till it is over. I am aware that she is dead but I am simultaneously aware of her as distinct presence in this room, listening to my words as I write, possibly assenting with her musing nod, possibly stifling a yawn.

LM, II, 249–50

It took McCarthy three years – ‘a heavy job’ – to complete the task of editing and annotating Arendt’s sprawling but magnificent *magnum opus*. Without that effort we would never have known the full architectonic ambition of Arendt’s final work. McCarthy showed immense courage in taking on the task and a great sense of duty towards her friend in fulfilling it. Duty and courage found their fulfilment in McCarthy’s friendship with Arendt, but they were also part and parcel of her moral constitution. She died on 25 October 1989, almost fourteen years after Arendt. As Frances FitzGerald, a much younger friend and distinguished author, said: ‘She was the bravest woman I ever met. In every respect. She would try anything. She was absolutely afraid of no one. And nothing. It wasn’t that she was arrogant, either. It wasn’t that at all. Watching her die, you realised how brave she was’ (quoted in Kiernan, 2000, 742). All one might add to that beautiful tribute is Elizabeth Hardwick’s judgement, as quoted in the statement heading this chapter: ‘She was so intelligent. And, you know, very eccentric in many ways.’

Of the four friendships discussed in this book, this is the only one between two women, and the only one in which Arendt is the older of the two friends. That is not to say that most of Arendt’s friends were men or that most were older. She had many female friends, including Anne Mendelssohn, who was her oldest friend, and many friends her own age and younger, some of whom had been her former students. Nevertheless, the differences between this friendship and the other three do provide some interesting points of comparison. The relationship between Arendt and McCarthy, although suffering an early setback, did not have to overcome the initial differentials of status that were clearly in evidence in the early stages of her relationships with Heidegger and Jaspers. Moreover, the issue of Arendt’s seniority only occasionally surfaces, as when, for example, she displays a slight sense of maternalism in response to McCarthy’s occasional episodes of vulnerability. Otherwise, it was a remarkably equal relationship in which neither sought to control the other and where

advice, when offered, was honest and impartial. Nor does there seem to have been any sexual rivalry between the two. On the contrary, they enjoyed the company of one another's partners, drew them into their shared friendship as and when appropriate, and affirmed one another's life choices. The power of their friendship lay in its capacity to support each of them in becoming fully herself.