

## Absent in Body, Present in Spirit



### The Tech Trilogy

Neil Thomas Proto, Editor \*

**Editor's Note:** In the early months of 2013, the novelist Mary McCarthy was approached by three colleagues in literature, each concerned in distinct ways by the problematic evolution of their reputation, and how and in what form it might endure into this Century: Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, and Mary Magdalene. Each invited a third person to aid in the dialogue: Dashiell Hammett, David Lean, and Frances Cabrini. The three sessions were recorded and later summarized by McCarthy. Only the summaries exist. Recently, doodles and napkin-filled notes were uncovered among her papers, which added some clarity to what occurred and allowed for the Editor's more fulsome presentation set out below. "Editor Inserts," sparingly added in the text (in brackets []) and endnotes, also are intended to further ensure clarity. The first Insert: McCarthy (1912-1989), authored, among others, *The Company She Keeps*, *The Group*, and *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*. She was an outspoken social critic, lapsed Catholic, and leftist political thinker.

# One

## Hemingway



“You will need a web site, Ernest. It’s not just the rage. It’s a necessity.” Mary McCarthy poured Hemingway another Pernod absinthe.

“The fennel is understated,” Hemingway replied, sipping his third Pernod with affectation.

“You’ve gotten to be the expert,” she noted.

Hemingway looked back placidly, then returned to his un-eaten oysters. “I know I must take this seriously. Even Scott [Fitzgerald], who has no appeal left or maybe had none to begin with, has started to design one.”

“He’ll get bad advice,” McCarthy said.

“Doesn’t matter,” said Dashiell Hammett. “Gatsby.” <sup>1</sup>

“Hmm,” Hemingway demurred. “What do you think, Mary? I mean about the web site.”

“Dashiell’s has a thread of truth to it. Black and white. Opened Scotch bottle. Shadows. Very noir. The swirl of cigarette—”

“I agree about the fennel,” Hammett said, declining McCarthy’s inquisitive nod toward the Pernod bottle, his finger swaying as he beckoned the waiter. “And ‘truth’? Hardly my intention, Missy. We should talk about *your* web site and—”

“We’re here for Ernest,” she said. “You want to do the ‘Papa’ guise? Though I think it wouldn’t wear today. At the least you’d have to color your bea—”

“Crop it,” Hammett muttered, having caught the waiter’s attention. “And lose a few pounds, Big Guy.”

“What will?” Hemingway asked McCarthy, while ensuring his shirt was buttoned. “The salon motif? The photo of me in the center? Intense? In discussion?”

“Coffee houses and cafes, Ernest, are not like that any—”

“Me at the typewriter? Cup and saucer? White table—”

“Coffee? Cheaper to have a shot of—”

“Look, Hammett. You in this or not?” McCarthy asked, intent on slashing his masculinity to polite size or at least by half. “Ernest invited you. Not I. I know you’re still angry at the way I sliced into Lillian [Hellman]—”<sup>2</sup>

Hammett straightened, his eyes stared rock-solid sober at McCarthy. The waiter placed a bottle of unnamed Scotch and a clean glass in front of him. He poured an inch and waited. “Forget the endorsement from the art patroness with the cutting edge attitude. Passé. Only insiders matter today. Media. Wall Street. Silicon Valley.”

“Okay,” Hemingway acceded as if losing an ace. “[Gertrude] Stein’s out. I could raise an elephant rifle in one hand and—”

Hammett filled his glass with rough gusto as if Scotch combated vanity.

“No?”

“Alabama. Maybe you’d increase sales in Alabama.”

“And. Well, Safaris?” McCarthy’s voice rose as she formed the word, her index finger moving in a sign of dismissal. “Too commonplace today.” She touched Hemingway’s arm. “Killing animals? Forget that. Which also means—”

“The bull fighting is out.”

“You didn’t climb Kilimanjaro either, Bud.”

McCarthy exhaled audibly in Hammett’s direction. His eyes widened and smoldered. She turned toward Hemingway as if Hammett was a firefly between bursts of relevance.

“But you are onto—?”

“Fishing and Cuba might work. I did catch a—,” Hemingway’s arms stretching out, ending in acknowledged futility when he couldn’t stretch any further.

“No. But you may have an—”

“You left Pilar!<sup>3</sup> There! In Cuba, of all places,” Hammett exclaimed, gulping the Scotch rhythmically like it was musical accompaniment. “Not the image you’d want to—”

“Enough, Hammett!” McCarthy said, laser-eyed, as if a stinging rejoinder was to follow.

Hammett moved to the edge of his chair. Ready for it. She inhaled deeply and smiled. The agitator, the provocateur. Dangling but not hooking. Not her task. Not today. Her voice held steady.

“Risk-taking. Risk-taking is in,” she said reassuringly to Hemingway, thinking of her experience in Vietnam and her famously piercing critique of Hammett’s lover.

“So?” Hemingway queried, almost to himself. “The journalist in war time.”

“That’s the theme,” she affirmed, task accomplished, as she looked to the next table and turned the page of assignments. “Images for the site abound,” emerged as an afterthought.

“Settled!” Hammett exclaimed. “And delete that goddamn photo of the photographer taking the photograph of the photographer taking your photograph in Africa. You know what I mean, Papa? Think Lawrence of Arabia’s web site.”

Hemingway reached comfortably for an oyster.



## Two

### Steinbeck



“Sorry to be late, John,” McCarthy said, noting gratefully that both men were sipping tea yet the pungent odor of cigarette smoke and the exaggerated nostril-exhale a sure sign of masculinity un-tethered. Steinbeck looked at her frigidly, coiled tightly, not like a cobra ready to bite but a seasoned matador uncertain how the bull—so far—had outwitted his stance and judgment. He took out another Camel and lit it with restrained frustration. “What happened, Mary? To America?”

David Lean stood abruptly. “You should have invited John Ford.”<sup>4</sup>

“He’s making a movie. Sit down. You helped Lawrence with his web site. ‘Image’ is what’s at stake. Content is settled. My works are read. I can’t believe this has happened. Only in English classes! Detached from their purpose.”<sup>5</sup>

McCarthy motioned Lean to sit. He alone had a “Director’s Chair”—his name embroidered in white. McCarthy agreed conditionally; its height remained the same as Steinbeck’s and hers. She moved closer to the table.

“You’re right John,” McCarthy said. “Reagan elevated greed. He saw the Supreme Court as a political tool and appointed ideologues, glib hypocrites, and they delivered. Today a corporation is a person, and—”

“It’s not just *Grapes of Wrath*,” Steinbeck lamented. “But that my work, the conditions I wrote about have been isolated in time and place. Their moral imperative—social and individual responsibility for others, changing course and

attitude. Renewing that purpose—David, I want your best thinking, showing the shameful conditions that still exist. The continuity. What the hell hap—?”

“I could have done something with *In Dubious Battle*,” Lean intoned, almost to himself.

Steinbeck’s face tightened.

“You came very close in *Zhivago* to what John would like,” McCarthy said matter-of-factly. “On the train. A few moments in the hospital. This is about poverty, hunger, the harsh lives of working people. And a government that acquiesces, even encourages it. Not just Hoover.”

“The Arab revolt,” Lean said unruffled, as if to an audience. “The way I portrayed Auda Abu Tayi. Anthony Quinn. I know how minds are changed and men die to do it.”

“Here’s what I wrote. *Grapes of Wrath*. This dialogue, when the farmers are kicked off the land. The agents and the farmers. The bank, it ‘don’t breath air, don’t eat side-meat.’ ‘It’s not us, it’s the bank. A bank isn’t like a man....Yes, but the bank is only made of men. No, you’re quite wrong there—Men made it, but they can’t control it.’ It ‘breaths profits,’ feasts on interest.”

“You had a moment, John,” Lean said, not quite talking in his direction, exhaling smoke in an upward swirl. “Aroused a nation. How to recapture—?”

“Feed them side-meat,” McCarthy said.

Steinbeck smiled and looked to Lean. Lean stood, certain the audience was his alone. “We’ll have the farmers and workers talking. Close-up. *Grapes* and *Dubious Battle*, could be from either—



—Images and voice-overs. Use Ford’s footage. And stills changing over time. Faces transformed into grape-pickers, longshoremen, factory workers, mill



workers. Mine workers. Christ, homeowners! Back to *Grapes*. They're talking to bankers, no end to the men we could include, they'll all stem from Capra's, ahh—



“Henry Potter.”

“Mean spirited, crudely glib, uncaring, manipulative, detached. Pierce the pretense of this manufactured, twenty-first century congeniality. In between we'll slip in two or three Supreme Court justices. Two other images, threads to a story, beginning with the harm to children and, here we'll capture the audience—The ‘Chamber of Commerce’ then and now. Just ‘taking care of their own,’ not jobs or fair wages and treatment.”



“Will it work, David?”

“One more image. Critical. Ma Joad. And keep evolving to the present.”



“Will it work, David?”

“It will start as a web site, John. *But someone—Someone, will make a movie.*”

“Is that enough? Web sites? Is that the best we can do?” Steinbeck reached for his Camels. He looked at McCarthy. She was exhaling, eyes opened widely, looking toward the next table. Lean was making notes, confidently.

Steinbeck closed the pack and put it in his pocket.

## Three

### Mary Magdalene



“Mary McCarthy. If some remnant of deference lingers from your Catholic education, now is not the time for it.”

“Not to be irreverent but let’s come back to that later. What shall I call you?”

“Mary. Now, please sit. I’ve brought my confidant with me, Frances Cabrini. You may call her Saint, Mother, or just Frances. She’s getting the wine. A Turkish, French, Italian, and American—”<sup>6</sup>

“If you tell me she’s also bringing ‘bread,’ well, —”

“Biscotti. We’re testing alternatives,” Cabrini said as she sat, her tone confident and feisty.

“The goal is simple to state though not easily accomplished. I want my gospel to be in the Bible.”



“I think we’re beyond the idea of ‘the web site,’” McCarthy observed dryly.

“It will mean shifts in the ‘Peter Paradigm.’”

“Indeed.” McCarthy said.

“You do need to allay my concern,” Magdalene said. “You wrote that you were ‘much attracted by an order for fallen women called the Magdalens.’ The ‘fallen women’ characterization came from—?”

“Peter and his progeny. Important now only as a vehicle for denunciation or maybe—”

“The ‘overcoming adversity’ story,” Magdalene declared.

“I see,” McCarthy said and paused. “We’ll need allies. More like a miracle. Can you arrange—?”

“My responsibility,” Cabrini said, seeming more the ideological collaborator than confidant. “Pope Leo the Thirteenth is in. He’ll have the addendum, ‘Justice for Women,’ to his 1891 Catholic social doctrine encyclical ‘discovered’ next year in the Vatican archives. It will set the tone. John the Twenty-third and Paul the Sixth are planning announcements. <sup>7</sup> Schism is in the making. Dorothy and—”

“Dorothy?”

“Dorothy Day and Mother Theresa are organizing the laity. We’ll have to manage the content and timing of their announcement supporting the gospel’s inclusion. And the parallel emergence of the renewed, preeminent role of Catholic social doctrine. Labor, the poor, and women.” <sup>8</sup>

“Melding two, shall I say, bold purposes?” McCarthy pondered.

“As for miracles?” Magdalene posited, sipping her wine. “I know where HIS sympathy lies. Do you have roll-out images in mind?”

“First. Theme music, maybe a song. I have two grand, musical storytellers. Bernstein and Copland.”

“Ecumenical?”

“This is about change,” McCarthy said.

“Precisely,” Cabrini said. “Dylan. Early Dylan.”

“He’s beyond my temporal purview.”

“Not ours,” Magdalene said. “The virtue of Sainthood.”

“Second. Clothes,” McCarthy said. “You open to variations? We could get Schiaparelli to design—”

“Pants?”

“Think media. The ‘Holy See boys’ have costumes. Theatrical for certain. They think it elevates them.”

“For some it’s all they have,” Cabrini said softly.

“I like diversity.” Magdalene said. “A conclave of different habits, maybe move to midnight blues and heaven grays, a butter yellow, different lengths, perhaps—”

“Conclave?” McCarthy asked.

“I’ll think about Schiaparelli. Let’s get back to the roll-out images.”

“The Group. Moving, in slow motion. Resolute, unwavering, unified. Day, Theresa, you, and Mother Cabrini. Suspenseful about your purpose. Mystery. Walking out of the gray mist and into the light, each holding a Bible.”



“—Interspersed in the sequence, a stack of discredited Bibles strewn nearby. Seated, only HIS hands and robe showing, reading the new, authentic one. Yours—



—Back to the four of you. A glimpse of St. Peter’s in the foreground. The suspense over purpose heightens.”

“Good beginning. I want you to think about incorporating a dinner. Rustic. Like the ‘First Supper.’ As for the Basilica’s name—”

“I see. Well—Back to your purpose as I’m coming to understand it. Your gospel is not exactly a departure from what exists.”

“There’s more.”

“Not yet discovered?”

“Frances, can we get Margaret Meade in on this?”

“Yes. I’ll tell her where to look.”

“Let’s talk opposition,” McCarthy said. “The current crowd for certain. And about everyone in the Vatican for the first twenty centuries, with the exceptions you’ve cultivated. Do you worry about that?”

“No. There’ll be a few strategic surprises even they don’t expect. The current one will see it’s inevitable, right, and biblically correct. And there will be—”

“Divine guidance?”

Cabrini stood, pirouetting sharply. “Our three Popes want to lead, signaling to others and—



—to ferment dialogue until the laity, clergy, and the sisters call for—as the Popes called it, ‘The *Vatican Extraordinary Conclave I* or *VEC I*.’ We already have the Honorary Chair. The Mother.”



“And you know,” Magdalene posited in the form of a question decidedly rhetorical, “what’s likely to happen once we get together?”

“More wine?” Cabrini asked McCarthy.

“No, but I’ll try a biscotti.”

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\* Neil Thomas Proto is a lawyer in Washington, DC, an affiliated professor at Georgetown’s McCourt Public Policy School, and writer ([www.NeilThomasProto.com](http://www.NeilThomasProto.com)). These three dialogues are a complete fable. The title is derived from Paul’s letter and imagery to the Corinthians. © Copyright NTPProto June 2013 (including the first image and excluding all the others attributable to various sources available on, of course, the internet).

<sup>1</sup> Hammett (1894-1961) was the author of numerous mystery novels, including *The Thin Man* and *The Maltese Falcon* (both made into major motion pictures), screenwriter, leftist political and civil rights activist, and Army veteran (WWI and II).

<sup>2</sup> Lillian Hellman (1905-1984) was a playwright (*The Children’s Hour*, *Little Foxes*, and *Watch on the Rhine*), screenwriter, and supporter of leftist political causes. She had an intimate, long-term relationship with Hammett until his death. In 1979, McCarthy, who had disputed Hellman’s political position and writings, said on the Dick Cavett Show that “every word [Hellman] writes is a lie, including ‘and’ and ‘the.’” Hellman’s lawsuit for libel ended after her death in 1984.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Pilar’ was Hemingway’s fishing boat, previously docked in the Florida Keyes. See *Hemingway’s Boat* by Paul Hendrickson (2012).

<sup>4</sup> Lean’s (1908-1991) movie credits include *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Dr. Zhivago*, and *A Passage to India*. Ford’s (1894-1973) include *The Grapes of Wrath*.

<sup>5</sup> Steinbeck’s (1902-1968) *In Dubious Battle* involved poverty and industrial oppression of labor. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962. His other works included *Of Mice and Men*, *Tortilla Flat*, *East of Eden*, *The Wayward Bus*, and *Travels with Charley*.

<sup>6</sup> Mother Francis Cabrini, Italian born, came to the attention of Pope Leo XIII and committed to aid Italian Immigrants in the United States to fulfill Pope Leo’s 1891 Encyclical on Catholic social doctrine. She was naturalized as an American citizen in 1909 and, in 1946, became the first naturalized American to be made a Saint. The reference to “Turkish, French, Italian, and American”

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blend wine is an apparent reference to Mary Magdalene's travel locations after Jesus' death, and Mother Cabrini's likely exposure to American wines.

<sup>7</sup> Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical, titled "New Things," recognized the horrific conditions industry imposed on working people, many of whom were Catholic immigrants, and the moral duty of government, industry, clergy, and nuns to protect labor unions, the poor, and women. John XXIII convened and Paul VI concluded the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), which required substantial changes in the Church liturgy and conduct.

<sup>8</sup> Dorothy Day (1897–1980) was a social activist for the poor, a Catholic convert, and writer for "The Catholic Worker." Though very controversial, and a strong adherent to Pope Leo's Catholic social doctrine when it was criticized and neglected within the Church, she has been nominated for Sainthood.