A Vision of the Apocalypse

Joe McCarthy's Rhetoric of the Fantastic

Her prophets are light and treacherous persons: her priests have polluted the sanctuary, they have done violence to the law.

—Zephaniah 3:4

After this I saw in the night visions, and behold a fourth beast, dreadful and terrible, and strong exceedingly; and it had great iron teeth: it devoured and brake in pieces, and stamped the residue with the feet of it: and it was diverse from all the beasts that were before it; and it had ten horns.

—Daniel 7:7

In his time, Joe McCarthy was hailed at the most gifted demagogue ever produced in America. Now, more than forty years after his censure by his colleagues in the United States Senate, the man and the phenomenon still cast a pall over political discussion in America. The name of the great smear campaigner has, in recent years, been hurled at those whom we wished to discredit and used by the discredited to suggest the injustice of their trial. Jeremiah Denton was compared to "that ultimate American witch-hunter, the late Joe McCarthy," and Kurt Waldheim, after charges were raised regarding his Nazi activities during the Second World War, claimed that he was the victim of McCarthyism. The Reagan administration's liberal application of the McCarran-Walter Act revived what Arthur Miller referred to as "one of the pieces of garbage left behind by the sinking of the great scow of McCarthyism." McCarthy's presence was felt in the 1988 presidential campaign when Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis, in response to aspersions cast on his patriotism, compared the tactics of his opponents to the slander of the late senator from Wisconsin. In one speech, Dukakis expressed his confidence that his Texas audience could "smell the garbage." One of the highest profile examples of the
revenant McCarthy, eerily evocative of the Army-McCarthy hearings, was Clarence Thomas's televised avowal before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee that the use of the U.S. Senate by unscrupulous forces bent on destroying the country was worse than McCarthyism. In 1992, McCarthy made a return visit to presidential politics as the Clinton campaign accused George Bush of McCarthyism for his attacks on Clinton's patriotism. Most recently, “P.C.,” or political correctness, has been denounced by its detractors as “McCarthyism of the left” and the war on drugs as “chemical McCarthyism.” Perhaps it is inevitable that the activities of Alfonse D'Amato's Whitewater investigative committee should have been compared to the activities of McCarthy's committees in the 1950s. More than forty years after his death, his lingering aura betrays how far we are from any satisfactory understanding of Joe McCarthy. Indeed, it is as if in not understanding him, we have not really buried him. McCarthy, by some power we still fail to comprehend, made himself one of the most prominent symbols of a decade of American life. The residual fear of that unidentified power still haunts the cloakrooms of American politics.

As a rhetorical phenomenon, McCarthyism has received surprisingly slight attention. Our moralistic revelations of his lapses of logic, his shameless unoriginality, his torturing of evidence, his half-truths, his ugly barbarisms, and his unforgivable uncouthness have been more dyslogic than critical and have revealed more about our own good intentions and our ideal rhetoric than they have about the mystery that is Joe McCarthy. Indeed, perhaps in seeking to discredit the substance of McCarthyism we have missed the larger question. Perhaps it is the metaphor of the specter that is appropriate for a discussion not only of McCarthy's continuing influence, but the source of that influence even while he was alive. Perhaps the substance of McCarthyism has remained so elusive and so invulnerable to exposure because there was no substance there at all. As Walt Kelly's Jayhawk, in a cartoon strip of the McCarthy era, responds when asked to prove the existence of the invisible Indians whom he claims raised him, “Bein' invisible they natural don't leave no traces an' to this day, no sign of 'em is ever been found. Sheer proof.” “Sheer,” affirms Pogo.

McCarthyism, I will argue, represents an apocalyptic rhetoric as a response to the dissolution of community in America. McCarthy did not attempt to resolve the crisis of his time through restoration of the covenant. Rather he capitulated to the widely felt notion that the old rules no longer held. He fled the crisis and accompanied his people into a hazy alterity. McCarthy's rhetoric is characterized by the indeterminacy, mystery, and
ambiguity of apocalyptic. It was, I will argue, an amplification of its time, never able to achieve the level of standing in definitive opposition.

A Great Cloud over the 1950s

Contemporary historians and social critics have labored in recent years to rescue from Broadway and television the decade of the 1950s as it has been sanitized, idealized, and popularly associated with I Love Lucy, hula hoops, enormous gaudy automobiles, gauche fashions, and a congenial prosperity. The Fifties, in fact, were no more fabulous than the 1890s were gay, and its apparently frivolous entertainments reveal, just beneath the surface, the same desperate seriousness that fueled the Roaring Twenties. The celebration of material well-being as the ultimate good reflected, as had been the case at the turn of the nineteenth century, the desuetude of any other form of value, and it concealed gross inequalities in the distribution of wealth. The frenetic pace of spending and the enlargement of the credit culture suggests an interior voice murmuring “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” Even our current nostalgia for the family of the Fifties, a family that seems, in shows like Leave It to Beaver, Father Knows Best, and Ozzie and Harriet, to have reached a state of beatitude, overlooks the degree to which these shows themselves reflected the nostalgic yearning of an anxious time for a presumably simpler and perhaps saner past. The Fifties simply cannot be adequately understood without recognizing World War II as their immediate predecessor and the “Great Fear” as much of their present.7

The horror of the Second World War, the second in as many generations, was certainly unsettling to Americans. Everything was on a scale that made a profanity of human beings—Hitler, the scope of the war, the new technologies of war, the bomb. Weaver called it “a marvelous confusion of values.”8 If the war itself was unsettling, the aftermath was even more so. There was no return to “normalcy” as there had been after the First World War. For all our victory parades and celebrations of the end of the war, there was an inconclusiveness about World War II. We could not simply disarm and return to a peacetime economy when it was over. America had new responsibilities in a world that had gotten smaller since the First World War. We had to help rebuild Europe and to maintain a cold war with the Soviet Union, formerly our ally.9 Korea was symbolic of many of our frustrations and anxieties. In August 1950, a Gallup poll found 57 percent
of Americans believing that our involvement in Korea was the beginning of World War III.  

The 1949 announcement that the Soviet Union had exploded an atomic bomb exacerbated tensions. In 1947, Americans ranked the “A bomb” second behind electric lights and appliances as the greatest invention in history. In 1949, following Truman’s announcement of evidence that the Soviet Union had exploded a nuclear weapon, 45 percent of Americans thought war was more likely as a result. Between 1947 and 1954, Americans consistently reported, by large majorities, that they believed it was the intention of the Soviet Union to achieve dominance over the world. The prevention of war was ranked as the most important problem facing the candidates in the 1950 elections, and a 1951 poll revealed that 50 percent of Americans would not feel safe in their cities or communities in the event of an atomic attack. Churchy La Femme, in Walt Kelly’s comic strip “Pogo,” complained of “these modern day disasters what consists of ten years of worry an’ ten seconds of boom an’ wango,” and lamented days spent “scannin’ the sky—not knowin’ when—wonderin’ whether to wear pajamas that night so’s to be found decent—wonderin’ whether to take a bath—whether to pack a light lunch.” William Faulkner, accepting the Nobel Prize for Literature, lamented, “Our tragedy today is a general and universal physical fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it. There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only the question: when will I be blown up?”  

For a country that had grown up in the faith that they were God’s Chosen People, destined to work His will on this earth, such power in the hands of an enemy nation could only mean that America’s select status had been decisively annulled, either by an angry God or by a rival one; there seemed to be little difference. But there is a very great difference between a God who uses calamity to His preordained ends and a God who competes with Satan for control over history, as the distinction between apocalyptic and prophecy suggests.

W. H. Auden’s 1947 poem “The Age of Anxiety” provided a convenient label for the time and gave eloquent expression to much that we could not or would not articulate. Auden wrote of “Lies and Lethargies” policing the world, and went on to develop a nightmare scenario around “The fears that we fear [when] We fall asleep. . . . Nocturnal trivia, torts and dramas. . . . Moulds and monsters on memories stuffed With dead men’s doodles, dossiers written In lost lingos,” and he recognized that, even in wakefulness, “athwart our thinking the threat looms, Huge and awful as the hump of
Saturn Over modest Mimas, of more deaths And worse wars, a winter of distaste To last a lifetime.” Our age, he mourned, was one “Infatuated with her former self Whose dear dreams though they dominate still Are formal facts which refresh no more.”

An autopsy on America’s “dear dreams” of “her former self,” the “formal facts” for which we now longed, revealed that they had been dead for some time. America finally faced an epistemological crisis that had its roots in the nineteenth century, the product of such diverse thinkers as Comte, Freud, Einstein, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Pierce, and James. The works of the existentialists, in particular, ignored for half a century, not merely in popular venues, but by professional philosophers, suddenly became the concern of “even the weekly news magazines.” Nineteen forty-eight saw the publication of the English translation of Albert Camus’s The Plague wherein Father Paneloux assured his congregation that God, after looking on the people of Oran with compassion for a long while, had grown weary of waiting: “His eternal hope was too long deferred, and now He has turned His face away from us. And so, God’s light withdrawn, we walk in darkness, in the thick darkness of the plague.”

Camus’s was not an American voice, but he and Sartre and other existentialists spoke to our anxieties. J. Ronald Oakley, in his history of the Fifties, notes that “much of the fiction of the day was concerned with individual alienation that led to despair, suicide, murder, rape, and other desperate acts of lonely individuals in mass society.” Like Father Paneloux’s congregation, Americans faced with crisis returned to the church in increasing numbers. The reason most commonly provided as an explanation for this religious revival, given by almost one third of the respondents in a 1954 Gallup poll, was “Fear, unrest, uncertainty of future.” Richard Niebuhr called it part “of a rather frantic effort of the naturally optimistic American soul to preserve its optimism in an age of anxiety.” In 1949, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., wrote, “Western man in the middle of the twentieth century is tense, uncertain, adrift. We look upon our epoch as a time of troubles, an age of anxiety. The grounds of our civilization, of our certitude, are breaking up under our feet, and familiar ideas and institutions vanish as we reach for them, like shadows in the falling dusk.”

Behind much of the angst of the Fifties and providing it with a kind of coherence was modern science. There was the obvious fact of the bomb, but the more important questions were the subtle ones about what it meant. There is a certain irony in the fact that Hiroshima and Nagasaki were the products of a theory that both taught us the limits of our knowl-
edge and laid the foundation for harnessing the greatest power known to humankind. The philosophically limited, pragmatic success of the atomic bomb granted the theory that made it possible considerable credibility in its claim that we could not know in any transcendent sense.\textsuperscript{25} It also suggested that such knowledge was superfluous.

The explosion of the atomic bomb, then, was the zenith of industrialization, a process that had steadily decayed the half-life of God. It was, in the words of social historian Paul Boyer, an event of such magnitude that it seems to have become “one of those categories of Being, like Space and Time, that, according to Kant, are built into the very structure of our minds, giving shape and meaning to all our perceptions.”\textsuperscript{26} By 1950, left with a God who was no longer immanent in the world, who was both unknowable and unnecessary, history became at best inscrutable, at worst meaningless.\textsuperscript{27} The foundation of the Common Sense philosophy that had sustained the American Revolutionaries, Wendell Phillips, and Eugene Debs had been thoroughly eroded. The unraveling of national community that had its roots in turn-of-the-century industrialization, though covered over by two world wars and a depression, was now exacerbated by developments in technology and society. It was in this era, the era in which Daniel Bell saw “the end of ideology,” the end of “secular religion”\textsuperscript{28} that Joe McCarthy claimed a place in the spotlight of American politics.

\textit{Photostats and Fantasy}

Joe McCarthy understood the feeling of moral arrest in his audience. He called it

an emotional hang-over . . . a temporary moral lapse which follows every war. . . . It is the apathy to evil which people who have been subjected to the tremendous evils of war feel. As the people of the world see mass murder, the destruction of defenseless and innocent people, and all of the crime and lack of morals which go with war, they become numb and apathetic. It has always been thus after war.\textsuperscript{29}

The prophet’s mandate in such times of crisis, as exampled in the cases of the American Revolution, Wendell Phillips, and Eugene Debs, is to judge. The prophet measures the conduct of the people against the law of God and exhorts the people to obey God’s will. He counters apathy with suffering, and demands an assertion of virtue. However distasteful the
prophet's demand may be, it abolishes all doubt in its appeal to absolute righteousness. Joe McCarthy's response to chaos was not certitude, but bewilderment.

McCarthy looked upon the postwar world and found it fantastic. "Strangely, however, after the arrest of six suspects in that case of treason, there was an unusual sequence of events, resulting in a most fantastic finale," said McCarthy, referring to the government's fumbled case against *Amerasia* magazine. Concerning the same case, McCarthy produced a letter from T. A. Bisson, a member of the *Amerasia* board. Bisson's letter was "a fantastic document if ever there was one." In a second reference, the letter from Bisson was called "a rather fantastic document coming from the man whom Mr. Jessup used to initiate the smear campaign—a rather fantastic document coming from a man high up in the State Department, but not too fantastic, however, when coming from a man who worked under Frederick Vanderbilt Field on *Amerasia*." According to McCarthy, Owen Lattimore was able to beguile audiences with "fantasies and untruths," attempting to sell the American people "a rather fantastic bill of goods." The failure of the Tydings Committee to call a witness suggested by McCarthy was "the most fantastic situation conceivable, something unheard of in any Senate or House Committee; unheard of even in a kangaroo court." The alleged raping of State Department personnel files before committee members were allowed access to them was "the most fantastic project I have ever heard of." And orders concerning the mission of the Seventh Fleet during the Korean war were termed "the most incredibly fantastic order that has ever existed in war or peace." "Impossible, yes! Unbelievable, yes! But it is all a matter of cold record."

McCarthy's reaction to the fantasy he discovered was, appropriately, amazement and incredulity. Our foreign policy was an "amazing failure"; the "picture of treason which I carried in my briefcase to that Caucus room [for the opening hearing of the Tydings Committee] was to shock the nation." A State Department document revealed the "astounding position of the Secretary of State," and McCarthy had no doubt that Senator Knowland of California would find much in it that would "shock him also." "Even in normal times," McCarthy said, his evidence would be "shocking." "Today, however, it is doubly shocking." Dean Acheson's failure to read some communist documents regarding China was "disturbing in the extreme. . . . Incredible. Incredible." And the failure of the Truman administration to expedite the delivery of economic and military
aid to Chiang Kai-Shek was “one of the most shocking subversions of the will of the Congress by an administration that our history will show.”

Owen Lattimore’s discussion of the China problem in the *Sunday Compass* of New York, July 17, 1949, was “astounding,” and the testimony of Secretary of State George Marshall “and his palace men” before the Russell committee was one of “self-satisfied shocking revelations.” Any attempt to understand one of Secretary of State Marshall’s statements on China was certain to leave McCarthy’s colleagues “dumbfounded.” McCarthy’s picture of Communist infiltration in America was “amazing . . . disturbing . . . incredibly unbelievable.”

McCarthy’s posture, beginning in astonishment, is entirely appropriate for an age of uncertainty, and it could be the basis for a shared pathos with his audience. Yet, in order for McCarthy to emerge as a prophetic leader, he would have needed to transcend this shared anxiety and articulate the true quality of events as measured against a shared moral code. The incipient sense of outrage in McCarthy’s remarks, though, never moves beyond the moment of wonder, and it finally leaves the audience in a phantasmagorical world, paralyzed by a fragile sense of the real and a lack of fixed criteria for choosing among the constantly shifting scenes.

McCarthy’s charges frustrate judgment by their bewildering lability. Even as he proclaimed the incredible nature of his discoveries, McCarthy insisted on their authenticity. Tzvetan Todorov has found a similar tension at the heart of the genre of the fantastic—the hesitation between belief and rejection, that moment suspended between the marvellous (the extraordinary but ultimately credible) and the uncanny (the bizarre and ultimately untrue), and Rosemary Jackson, building on Todorov’s work, writes, “A characteristic most frequently associated with literary fantasy has been its obdurate refusal of prevailing definitions of the ‘real’ or ‘possible,’ a refusal amounting at times to violent opposition.” McCarthy’s astonishment that the rules have been broken even as he continues to believe in their binding force, his confrontation with the “anti-expected,” signals the presence of the genre of the fantastic, a celebration of ambiguity, something indefinite, a moment of hesitation and indecision. When we encounter an extraordinary event, for the interval that we cannot decide whether we are hallucinating or witnessing a miracle, we are participants in the fantastic. It is a moment of epistemological uncertainty. The literary fantastic, while it raises emotions and exploits attitudes, stubbornly refuses to render final judgments that would allow us to direct them. As Eric Rabkin puts it,
“The wonderful, exhilarating, therapeutic value of Fantasy [for Rabkin, the genre most characterized by the fantastic] is that it makes one recognize that beliefs, even beliefs about Reality, are arbitrary.”51

The conception of the fantastic in literary studies stands in sharp contrast to uses common in communication studies, where fantasy or the fantastic is examined for its constitutive force.52 The fundamental uncertainty of the literary fantastic refuses the epistemological grounds on which community might be (re)constructed. Rather than ordering the chaos of the world propaedeutic to judgment, the fantastic is a capitulation that merely reflects our confusion back to us. In this respect, it can be argued that the fantastic is a modern analog to biblical apocalyptic, now divorced from a specific theology. The parallel to apocalyptic reminds us that, while Rabkin emphasizes the liberating, “exhilarating” aspects of literary fantasy, its terrifying aspects—the incipient chaos, a kind of epistemological freefall—must not be forgotten. Alice’s adventures are filled with horrific moments. The effect is even more unsettling when the fantastic insinuates itself into politics.

In order to give direction in such a setting, McCarthy had to find some anchor, some stable axiom on which to build. McCarthy understood that he was not charismatic; however colorful a figure he may have been, he recognized that he was not blessed with the divine. He never claimed a transcendent insight, and he never made the prophet’s “of a truth the Lord hath sent me” his claim to the credence of his audiences.

Against the incredible, McCarthy pitted the completely secular epistemology of his time, the objective, the verifiable, the political equivalent of scientific facts: “I have in my hand,” “The file shows,” “I have nothing completely ready at this time, and must refer to the documents before me,” “There is a memorandum in the file,” “A report dated July 16, 1947, states,” “I have before me several documents.” “I have before me another document.” “I have a copy of it in my hand.” “I have a photostat of the letter.” “I have before me an affidavit.” “I hold in my hand two photostats.” “Since that time I have dug up additional photostats.” “I have before me a copy.” “Mr. President, I have a file which I desire to insert in the Record today, containing photostats.” “I hold in my hand the testimony.” “Here are photostats of official letterheads.” “I have complete unchallengable documentation.” “I hold in my hand the official record.”53 These are the phrases McCarthy used throughout his speeches to create an objective reality credible enough to balance his claims on the marvelous.

Barnet Baskerville termed McCarthy a “brief-case demagogue.”54 The ever-present, overstuffed briefcase was a repository of the objective, the
facts, photostatic reproductions, the record. Richard Rovere saw in it McCarthy’s desire to have “the dust of the archives clinging to him.” The briefcase was external to McCarthy; it was not subjective. McCarthy only produced the evidence and invited the audience to share in his incredulity. McCarthy’s speeches in the Senate are an endless request for unanimous consent to have articles, letters, memoranda, and other materials printed in the Congressional Record. McCarthyism: The Fight for America is similarly filled with photographs, photostatic copies of documents, letters, and articles, and appeals to published testimony by other sources, that is, the public record. In the Army-McCarthy hearings, two of the most dramatic confrontations occurred over a cropped photograph and a document, purportedly a carbon copy of a letter from J. Edgar Hoover, which Army counsel Joseph Welch derided as “a copy of precisely nothing,” thus contributing to the sense of unreality.

McCarthy’s heavy dependence on documentation was, in a sense, crippling; it betrayed his own doubts about the credibility of the picture he presented to his audiences and made judgment impossible. There is no affirmation in McCarthy’s discourse, only hesitation. As Jackson has put it, “By foregrounding its own signifying practice, the fantastic begins to betray its version of the ‘real’ as a relative one, which can only deform and transform experience, so the ‘real’ is exposed as a category, as something articulated by and constructed through the literary or artistic text.” In a similar vein, Rabkin notes, “In the transcendent reality of the fiction, the fictional becomes real; and then we are reminded that the real is itself fictional. This self-reflection is fantastic.” The effect is circular and inescapable. A dialectic is created in which each element undermines the other, making the synthesis absurd. Every time he presented evidence, McCarthy, with equal vigor, discredited it, making it impossible for his audience to decide which part of the claim to accept. In placing so much weight on evidence that he had termed questionable, McCarthy called into question, not just the particulars of his case, but the integrity of evidence itself. Like a magician exposing the pedestrian mechanics of his tricks, McCarthy suggested the illusory nature of all demonstration.

McCarthy could not lead for he had no direction, and he could not judge for he had no standard. Joe McCarthy was not part of the sacred. He was not a transcendent being who bore the understanding of God’s will. He was just Joe, a skunk hunter from a small farm community in the Midwest, and he was just as amazed as the rest of us.

In creating, but not resolving, a tension between the uncanny and the
marvelous, the real and the incredible, McCarthy subverted his own efforts at persuasion. But his Faustian exchange also broached untold possibilities. By implicitly denying the compelling power of his evidence, he called into question its theoretical basis. “Presenting that which cannot be, but is, fantasy exposes a culture’s definitions of that which can be: it traces the limits of its epistemological and ontological frame,” writes Jackson.\(^59\) This is the significance of McCarthy’s posture—“Inconceivable? Yes. But it is true.”\(^60\)

Unhampered by the laws of the everyday world, McCarthy was free to take his audience into a domain in which unpleasant judgment could be withheld indefinitely.\(^61\) As Rabkin puts it, “This function of the fantastic is educational in the root sense: . . . it creates in the mind a diametric reversal and opens up new and fantastic worlds.”\(^62\) Americans were not looking for a Father Paneloux to tell them that their sinfulness was responsible for their sorry state, but a Father Paneloux who could hold marvelous evil forces in a balance with our culpability, commanding our assent to neither, this Father Paneloux had promise for America in the Fifties.

The world McCarthy fashioned was a dark creation where things were not always what they seemed to be, a world where evil forces worked behind a veil of secrecy.

How can we account for our present situation unless we believe that men high in this Government are concerting to deliver us to disaster? This must be the product of a great conspiracy, a conspiracy on a scale so immense as to dwarf any previous such venture in the history of man. A conspiracy of infamy so black that, when it is finally exposed, its principals shall be forever deserving of the maledictions of all honest men.\(^63\)

Reflecting the hyperbolic tendencies of the fantastic, the conspiracy McCarthy described was of superhuman, supernatural proportions.\(^64\) Populated with evil geniuses and sinister cabalists in unholy alliance, parading as newspapermen, honored generals, secretaries of state, and presidents, all meeting in richly paneled but outwardly innocent looking barns, pouring over secret documents, engaged in secret plots involving spies, espionage, and infiltration, with the ultimate aim of destroying Western civilization, McCarthy’s world was a nightmare. He intimated “hidden and undisclosed forces,” “dark forces,” “chicanery,” the “mysterious” disappearance of incriminating documents, secret contracts, and secret trials, and secret parleys, “treachery,” and “lies.”\(^65\) Metaphorically, McCarthy introduced octopi, snakes, and spiders into the dream: the hoax being perpetrated was “mon-
A Vision of the Apocalypse

strous”; “the Communist party—a relatively small group of deadly conspirators—has now extended its tentacles to that most respected of American bodies, the United States Senate”; a “world-wide web” of conspiracy had been spun from Moscow; Drew Pearson and fellow travelers were venomous; “the Truman Democratic Administration was crawling with Communists”; Dean Acheson was elegant and alien. Homosexuals, too, figured prominently in McCarthy’s fantasy world, yet another perversion of the rules of everyday life.

Even more threatening than the ability of the enemy to assume malevolent forms was its ability to assume no form at all, to become invisible: “One knows that traitors are at work. One sees the political fingerprints of the Communists on every document drafted. One can see the footprints of Communist betrayals down every path they travel.” In a metaphor that might have recalled the contemporaneous film The Invisible Man, McCarthy claims to see the signs of communist presence, but not the communists themselves.

The idea of invisibility recalls the metaphors of vision discussed earlier. McCarthy’s use of this set of metaphors reveals basic epistemological differences between himself and his radical precursors. In the discourse of the American Revolution, Wendell Phillips, and Eugene Debs, there is an emphasis on awakening to a new dawn, a new day of work and exertion. Sleep is a personal condition; it is restful and comfortable. Ideological sleep is an indulgence, an avoidance of confrontation and judgment, a failure of virtue. The same holds true for willful blindness. It is an incapacity of the individual, subjective, not objective. When awakened the truth is irresistible; the dawn, the new day, is inexorable, reminding us again of the origin of the term revolution.

McCarthy, on the other hand, dwells on darkness, things done in the night. Darkness is not a personal incapacity; it is imposed from without. In a discussion of the rhetorical uses of archetypal metaphor, Michael Osborn finds that darkness brings “fear of the unknown, discouraging sight, making one ignorant of his environment—vulnerable to its dangers and blind to its rewards. One is reduced to a helpless state, no long able to control the world about him. Finally, darkness is cold, suggesting stagnation and thoughts of the grave.” Osborn’s description resonates remarkably with the description of the anxieties of the Fifties presented above, and is an apt characterization of the darkness metaphor as used by McCarthy. Sleep is no longer a personal indulgence, but something induced by evil forces so that they might do their work undetected. McCarthy suggested that the American
people had been given sleeping tablets by the president and the State Department in order to lull them into a false sense of security, and that Truman was persuaded to fire MacArthur “in the dead, vast, and middle of the night.”

“I awake each morning in the fear that overnight, in some secret chamber of the United Nations, the enemies of the United States, with Britain and India at their head, have made a secret deal—a new Yalta.”

As nocturnal creatures, McCarthy’s enemies have kinship with witches, vampires, bats, rats, and wolves. “The enemies of our civilization, whether alien or native, whether of high or low degree, work in the dark,” he warned. “They are that way more effective.”

“The pattern of Communist conquest has been the same in every country over which the stygian blackness of Communist night has descended.”

It is McCarthy’s expressed intention to expose the communists, to subject them to the searching light of truth, but they are powerful and his success is not guaranteed: “If, after all is said and done, this unholy alliance should have its way, then I propose the premise that holds it together—that vigorous anti-communism is more dangerous than communism—as a fitting epitaph on the grave of American civilization.”

That McCarthy could allow for the death of civilization, that he could, in his rhetoric, acknowledge the possibility of failure, is a phenomenon absent from the preceding chapters. The basically optimistic prophetic faith seen heretofore does not allow for the final triumph of an “unholy alliance.”

There are only two sources of power in that simple world: God and human will. One is either awake and acts in accordance with God’s will or one is asleep or willfully blind and acts in accordance with human will. But human will is insignificant compared with the will of God, and in the end, God’s purpose will be served. The evil confronted by earlier radical movements was merely the venal exercise of the human will: George III as a symbol of England, the plantation owners of the South, and the industrialists of the turn of the century shared a common sin in their rejection of God’s justice, the justice of natural law, in favor of their personal luxury. More importantly, the people shared in the sin by their complicity in a corrupt system; the judgment is addressed to them. The audience of the prophet is second-person plural. Such evil is human scale and ultimately ineffectual.

McCarthy presents a different theology. It is not the optimistic theology of prophecy, but the pessimistic theology of apocalyptic, given sophisticated treatment in McCarthy’s time in works like Reinhold Niebuhr’s *Children of Light, Children of Darkness*. McCarthy did not crusade against the failure of
human virtue; his holy war was against evil. In his famous speech at Wheeling, West Virginia, in 1950 he drew the lines of battle:

Today we are engaged in a final, all-out battle between communistic atheism and Christianity. The modern champions of communism have selected this as the time. And, ladies and gentlemen, the chips are down—they are truly down.76

Two years later, in another famous speech wherein he accused Adlai Stevenson of aiding the communist cause, McCarthy averred,

We are at war tonight—a war which started decades ago, a war which we did not start, a war which we cannot stop except by either victory or death. The Korean war is only one phase of this war between international atheistic communism and our free civilization.77

The earthly war in Korea is insignificant; it is merely a symptom of the all-consuming cosmic war that would determine our fate. Human history is inadequate to contain forces of this magnitude. In 1954, just before his censure by the Senate, McCarthy sang the same refrain: “At the risk of boring you with some repetition, I repeat, the world is in an ideological struggle, and we are on one side and the Iron Curtain countries are on the other.”78 From the time he took up the anticommunist cause until the virtual end of his career, McCarthy consistently warned of the imminence of the Armageddon.

McCarthy capitalized on, but did not create, the radical agon reflected in these excerpts. The appellation “the Cold War” testifies to the ubiquity of such thinking, even among relative moderates. Upon assuming the presidency for a second term in 1957, Dwight Eisenhower spoke of a divided world: “The divisive force is international communism and the power that it controls. The designs of that power, dark in purpose, are clear in practice.”79 It was a modern variant of the old Persian dualism. But McCarthy’s reaction was notable. While Eisenhower and others continued to talk of “unconquerable will,” “firm and fixed purpose[s],” “hope,”80 McCarthy warned of failure.

In representing a battle of such epic proportions, McCarthy again stretches credulity and suggests something of the nexus between apocalyptic and fantasy. Paul Hanson has found in the transition between prophetic and apocalyptic eschatology a shifting of the relative weights of the elements of the real and the mythic, the mundane and the visionary. Hanson illustrates a reintroduction of the mythic into prophetic discourse in Deutero-Isaiah
51:9–11, a call for God to awaken and exercise again the power by which He slew Ra’hab, the dragon of chaos. The scale and theme are common to McCarthy’s discourse, apocalyptic, and fantasy.

The scale of McCarthy’s war is matched by the power of his warriors. Fantasy is a completely determined world; happenstance is abolished; the regnant powers control events to the most minute detail. Todorov calls it “pan-determinism”: “everything,” he writes, “down to the encounter of various causal series (or ‘chance’) must have its cause, in the full sense of the word, even if this cause can only be of a supernatural order.”

The obvious language for the expression of such power is the language of conspiracy. Conspiracies are not accidental; they are, literally, “a breathing together”; they are contrived. As McCarthy expressed it,

The people, Mr. President, recognize the weakness with which the administration has replaced what was so recently our great strength. They are troubled by it. And they do not think it accidental. They do not believe that the decline in our strength from 1945 to 1951 just happened. They are coming to believe that it was brought about, step by step, by will and intention. They are beginning to believe that the surrender of China to Russia, the administration’s indecently hasty desire to turn Formosa over to the enemy and arrive at a ceasefire in Korea instead of following the manly, American course prescribed by MacArthur, point to something more than ineptitude and folly.

McCarthy’s Republican colleagues had hoped that such declarations were simply enthusiastic displays of partisan politics and that the election of Eisenhower would curb McCarthy’s zeal. They were dismayed when this was not the case, but McCarthy’s controversial attacks on Eisenhower were perfectly consistent with what has been argued here. In McCarthy’s fantasy world, the election of a Republican administration was simply a change in human personnel. The real battle was elsewhere.

The tandem concept to pan-determinism in fantasy is “pan-signification.” The world of fantasy is a highly structured drama. Every event contributes to the advancement of the plot. In apocalyptic fantasy, all events are filled with foreshadowings of the end, all of which must be attended to and interpreted. McCarthy’s world was just such a world, groaning with meaning: “At first blush the policy as set forth in the above document would appear disorganized and without clear point. It was not pointless, however. Those who drafted it understood very clearly the over-all plan being advanced.”

“You need not seek far to find the real reason lurking
behind this avowed one." Pan-signification is the continuing testimony to
the awesome powers at work in the world of fantasy; to exercise such
control that every action infallibly works toward a predetermined end is
precision on a terrifying scale:

To fit this incident into the global picture, let me remind you, these prisoners
have been held by the Chinese for two years, so their selection of a time of
announcement was, of course, a deliberate act. In fact, we have—we find
little evidence in all of the actions of the Communist states that indicates any
haphazard actions on their part. Everything they do is deliberate and well-
thought out.

Superhuman intelligence is ascribed to the enemy, thus the “evil genius”
theme so prominent in McCarthy’s rhetoric. Evil genius—“twisted-
thinking intellectuals”—has the power not only to execute its designs, its
“blueprint for disaster,” but also the power to conceal its design by cor-
ruping the judgment of the American people, tricking them into believing
false interpretations of traitorous objectives. Like McCarthy’s world, the
monistic world of the prophet is heavily invested with meaning, but the
interstices are left to the exercise of human frailty, and human frailty is not
an effective causal agent. As suggested in the previous chapter, monism
implies one design for the world and one meaning for events. One is either
asleep (blind) or awake, but not mistaken.

In a dualistic cosmology, there are two designs for the world, equally
powerful in their plausibility. One may be asleep (blind) or awake, and if
awake, one may be confronting truth or illusion, good or evil. The power
of evil is often portrayed as that of the seductress exercising hypnosis or
enchantment, casting spells that cause us to act, not in accordance with our
own will, but not in accordance with the good either. Evil has both the
power to conceal its influence and to parade as the good.

It is this powerful evil that McCarthy presented to his audiences. McCar-
thy talked of Alger Hiss’s exercising a “Svengali-like influence over Secre-
tary of State Stettinius” at Yalta, and of Marshall and Acheson’s having a
“hypnotic influence” over Truman. “I regard as the most disturbing
phenomenon in America today the fact that so many Americans still refuse
to acknowledge the ability of Communists to persuade loyal Americans to
do their work for them.” The American people must be alerted to the fact
“that this vast conspiracy possesses the power to turn their most trusted
servants into its attorneys-in- fact.” “It is,” said McCarthy, “the clandes-
tine enemy which taxes our ingenuity.”
McCarthy presented America with Tamino's choice and no clear criteria by which to make it. Sometimes he appeared to offer the lifeline of "just good, everyday American horse sense." For example, when identifying communists, he simply looked for people and policies that reflected the Communist Party line "right down to the dotting of every 'i' and the crossing of every 't': "As one of my farmer friends once said, if a fowl looks like a duck and quacks like a duck and eats like a duck we can assume it is a duck." Such confidence in appearances, however, was undermined by those like the former communist and professional government witness Louis Budenz in his testimony on Owen Lattimore. In a performance that would have made Lewis Carroll proud, Budenz refused to assent to any stable criteria:

Wasn't it true, asked Morgan, that Lattimore's Solution in Asia had been condemned by the Daily Worker? Yes, Budenz replied, but the Party often protected its members by criticizing them, "that is to say, that is, to damn them with faint praise—rather, to praise them with faint damn, is the way I want to put it." And hadn't Lattimore publicly opposed the Soviet invasion of Finland? True enough, said Budenz, but Party members were sometimes given "exemptions" in order to disguise their real purpose.

In the world of fantasy, it is not obvious what things mean. The rules have been subverted and are no longer dependable. McCarthy, his appeals to common sense notwithstanding, understood this; he understood that he could not merely show, he had to interpret: "Do Senators follow me?" "Do Senators follow this?" "Do Senators get the picture?" he queried again and again. "I wonder whether Senators get the awfulness of that picture." "Now what does this mean, my good friends, what does this mean to the 150,000,000 American people?" he asked his television audience. "I digress to explain the significance of that utterance." "In order to recognize the significance of these two documents, it might be well for me to digress for a minute." "In other words . . ." In other words, the documents he held in his hand were not enough; they did not carry their own self-evident meaning. Sometimes they required translation. After presenting a quotation that noted that General Stilwell, Secretary of State Marshall's choice to command the U.S. Army in China, did not like Chinese officialdom but had a great regard for the Chinese people, McCarthy offered the following interpretation:

As we all know, "people" in Communist parlance has a special meaning. It does not mean all the people in our sense. It is a catchword, an occult word,
clear to the initiates, meaning Communists. They use it in a special sense to designate all their political organs. We all recall the various people's fronts organized to promote the Communist cause throughout the world. More specifically the Chinese Communist army was referred to in Communist parlance as the people's army.103

“People” is one of the most generic and colorless terms available to denote an aggregate of human beings. McCarthy recognizes this when he contrasts the communist “special meaning” with “our sense,” innocent and inclusive. The communist “people,” according to McCarthy, who freights the usage in this context with sinister implications, is only a ruse, an attempt to pass beneath the threshold of signification. The achievement of discerning a particular significance is secondary to the achievement of recognizing that there is a significance to be discerned.

McCarthy’s struggle to separate the significant from the insignificant is unremitting. Figure-ground discriminations are not clear in the dark world of the fantastic: “Note those words, Mr. President.” “Mr. President, listen to this.” “I call the Senate’s attention to this statement.” “Listen to this if you will.”104 In a complex, relativistic world, all events require interpretation; nothing is unworthy of our attention.

I have concentrated on how McCarthy used his evidence to create tensions between belief and doubt in his audiences, but none of McCarthy’s evidence would ever have been given a forum had it not been for the power of his office. There is no doubting that much of the credence given McCarthy’s claims resulted from his status as a U.S. senator. As David Oshinsky has phrased the question that had to be raised by McCarthy’s charges, “Would a United States senator go this far out on a limb without hard evidence?”105 Millard Tydings knew very well that as a senator, McCarthy was more likely to be believed than someone standing “on the corner of 9th and G streets who is carrying on a casual conversation,”106 and Walter Lippman recognized the power of the office when he argued that McCarthy’s charges, because he was a senator, were news and had to be treated as such, however reluctantly; McCarthy could not be suppressed by the media.107

Though the institutions of the media could not, without the benison of the Senate, themselves author McCarthy’s undoing, the representational power of the media, especially television, did serve a critical enabling function when the Senate finally decided that McCarthy had overstepped the bounds of allowable conduct. And it is consistent with the thesis argued here that, in the instances where the media authored its own scripts, some
of the most influential among them employed an ironic mode. Irony forgoes the head-on attack and unsettles its object indirectly. There is a sense in which, just as the fantastic simultaneously demands our assent and dismisses such a demand, irony also mounts its criticism and is able to retreat to a posture of “all in fun” or of having been misread.

Even television, though, had to await a certain revocation of sanctuary before it could exercise its power against Wisconsin’s junior senator. As a senator, McCarthy spoke from the temple, and was provided, not only the sanctuary of congressional immunity, but even a certain amount of support in the reluctance of the Senate to disavow one of its own. Because Republicans, in fact, were eager to use McCarthy in the pursuit of their own political ends, McCarthy received the blessing of the Tafts, the Lodges, and other party scions who personally found him and his methods distasteful.

Nowhere is McCarthy’s dependence on the positive sanction of the Senate clearer than in the course of his career after his censure in 1954. The censure, although it did not materially affect McCarthy’s standing in the Senate, did serve notice that he no longer participated in the collective ethos of that body; the Senate had admitted that McCarthy had said discreditable things, and in doing so, it broke the spell of the fantastic. Alice awoke from the dream and was left with only reflections on the uncanny. Because McCarthy had built his case on the collective ethos of the Senate, he had tacitly ceded to it the effective power to discredit him as a part of itself. The effect of the censure on the press and the public was immediate and unmistakable: it was no longer necessary to pay attention to Senator McCarthy.

McCarthy had an unfailing apprehension of the epistemological crisis of the Fifties with its “key terms”: “irony, paradox, ambiguity, and complexity,” and he exploited that apprehension ruthlessly. McCarthy apprehended the crisis because he participated in it. His discourse does not indicate that he ever transcended it. His audience was not the prophetic “you,” but the inclusive “we.” Within that crisis, McCarthy struck a delicate balance that avoided judgment, and in avoiding judgment, he left his audience in disarray. As frightening as chaos was, it seems that it may have been preferable to the terrible truths that threatened America after the Second World War. By offering a discourse that did not command assent, McCarthy allowed America to contemplate some of its most dreadful monsters at a distance. The delicate equilibrium that he maintained for almost four years was wrecked when the hierarchical power bestowed on him by his seat in the Senate was symbolically revoked. The scale fell
abruptly on the side of the uncanny, and Americans were left to wonder at how bizarre it had all been.

Evaluating the Dream

McCarthyism has been termed a national nightmare. By taking the metaphor literally, we are in a position to understand some of the contradictions that still occupy the attentions of McCarthy’s biographers, students of McCarthyism, and historians of the period. The underlying debate in all the biographical works on McCarthy devolves on the question of sincerity. Beginning with Rovere’s biography at the end of the McCarthy decade, and continuing through Oshinsky’s, currently regarded as definitive, everyone who has focused on the man has felt compelled to look at the sources of McCarthy’s anticommunism; a series of conflicting impressions regarding the sometimes playful attitude he took toward his crusade in private, his apparent lack of passionate involvement with the topic, his childish delight in spy games, and his nonchalant attitude toward particular cases; his documented fondness for lying; his statement to Jack Anderson that this was the real thing; and his willingness to endure censure rather than back down. Much of the evidence divides along the lines of a Jekyll and Hyde public presentation versus private behavior. McCarthy’s willingness to excoriate a political opponent or a member of the press for the crowd and then to turn and throw a friendly arm around his victim is a source of constant perplexity to his chroniclers.

To find conflict in these apparent oppositions is to assume a stable set of rules, and fantasy has no such rules. It is, writes Jackson, “founded on contradictions.” And not just a single set of contradictions, but “the continuing diametric reversal of the ground rules within a narrative world.” Fantasy embraces both fear of the demonic and a sense of play. Fantasy cannot find stable reference points. If it did the moment of hesitation would be lost, and it would no longer be fantasy. McCarthy’s failure to display a commitment to his individual cases may not have been an effective method of exposing communists, but it was sublimely effective in prolonging the moment of hesitation.

Finally, having sundered all other unities, all other sources of stability, fantasy shatters the unity of the individual. In a reversal of the apocalypticist’s pseudonymity, McCarthy went beyond the bounds of ghostwriting to appropriate materials never intended for his use. “America’s Retreat from
Victory” is the most prominent example. McCarthy did not digest the materials provided by others and make them his own, he simply gave them voice. “McCarthyism” absorbed the identity of Joe McCarthy into the much larger phenomenon he represented.

Fantasy often signals the dissolution of identity with a narrative voice confused between first and third person singular. McCarthy reveals the same split persona in his speeches and writings. He informs his audience, “The smear attacks on McCarthy are no longer being made with the hope that they can thereby force me to give up this fight to expose and get Communists out of government.” “On that day the President of the Newspaper Guild, Harry Martin, attacked McCarthy and made it clear to the membership that any favorable coverage of my fight against Communists was taboo.” “Even my bitterest enemy will admit, if he is honest, that these matters would not have been given a second thought if someone other than McCarthy were involved.” Between the two McCarthys, it seems likely that all his biographers are right in the main. Their mistake is in trying to find a nonexistent resting place. McCarthy’s manic levels of activity are a metaphor for his world, which was in constant disequilibrium.

Does this leave us anything to say about the McCarthy ethos, fragmented and disjointed as it is? Certainly it can be said that McCarthy was no prophet: he was guided by no self-evident truths, no sacred canon; he did not offer judgment in time of crisis. All his cries of “smear” notwithstanding, the evidence overwhelmingly indicates that McCarthy did not suffer the burden of his commitments (at least not until after censure), but reaped the personal rewards of his message—notoriety, money, and political power. Nor did McCarthy confront his society with a radical position, for fantasy cannot posit. What was mistaken for radicalism by some of McCarthy’s contemporaries was really just the hyperbolic, irrational discourse of fantasy parading as politics. Even as fantasy, McCarthy’s was not very extraordinary by the standards of the period. Films of the Fifties shared many of the same themes and uncertainties we find in McCarthy’s discourse. McCarthyism as a fantasy was little more than a shameless amalgam of The Court Martial of Billy Mitchell and Invasion of the Body Snatchers. And radio programs such as “I Was a Communist for the FBI” provided audiences with an atmosphere of multiple reversals and subterfuges that made the convolutions of McCarthy’s stories commonplace. A nation willing to join in the search for Bridey Murphy was not shaken by McCarthy’s rejection of the traditional unities of narrative.

In failing to challenge his audience with the radical values of their
society, McCarthy stood as a symbol of the deterioration of those values. Rather than reconstituting his audience, he left it in a state of dissolution. Richard Rovere has written,

McCarthy, though a demon himself, was not a man possessed by demons. His talents as a demagogue were great, but he lacked the most necessary and awesome of demagogic gifts—a belief in the sacredness of his own mission. A man may go a long way in politics—particularly in democratic politics—without much in the way of convictions, but to overcome adversity he needs the strength that can be drawn either from belief in an idea or from a sense of his own righteousness. If he has no convictions, he can scarcely draw courage from them.¹²³

Perhaps it is for this reason, rather than for its actual prohibitions, that Ellen Schrecker finds the legacy of McCarthyism to be one of absences: “McCarthyism’s main impact may well have been in what did not happen rather than in what did—the social reforms that were never adopted, the diplomatic initiatives that were not pursued, the workers who were not organized into unions, the books that were not written, and the movies that were never filmed.”¹²⁴

McCarthy was plagued by demons and bereft of gods. He created a momentary audience out of common fears, but he could not provide it or himself with a sustaining cause. The swaggering, loutish Marine hero was a cripple, and we watched him toss away his crutches in an evangelical fever and fall on his face—pitiable and for that reason all the more despicable. McCarthy never assumed a radical heroic stand against the overwhelming uncertainties of his day; his faith lacked the necessary substance. The notable absence of historical references in his speeches reveals the shallowness of his response to the world. He had nothing to draw upon but the resources of his own profane experience. McCarthy could worship nothing larger than himself, only fear it.

McCarthy the man, we must probably conclude, was a tragic figure. He participated in the epistemological chaos of his time to the point of psychosis.¹²⁵ McCarthy’s fantasy world was his poor response to fear, and it is only when we recognize fantasy as a form of spiritual impoverishment that we can properly evaluate what McCarthy wrought. Building her case on the work of Sartre, Foucault, and Frederic Jameson, Jackson finds in fantasy human compensation for a failure of the transcendent.¹²⁶ She quotes Maurice Levy’s assertion that: “The fantastic is a compensation that man provides for himself, at the level of imagination, for what he has lost at the
level of faith." The compensation that humankind can provide for itself, however, is insufficient to replace what has been lost, for fantasy is hollow at its core:

Unlike marvelous secondary worlds, which construct alternative realities, the shady worlds of the fantastic construct nothing. They are empty, emptying, dissolving. Their emptiness vitiates a full, rounded, three-dimensional visible world, by tracing in absences, shadows without objects. Far from fulfilling desire, these spaces perpetuate desire by insisting upon absence, lack, the non-seen, the unseeable.

Fantasy, framed as a literary event, provides a temporary escape. It may even, as Sade claims of Eugenie de Franval and Justine, or Good Conduct Well Chastised, provide moral guidance. When it is transposed without warning into the quotidian realm of politics and business, devoid of artistic boundaries, it is paralyzing.

For a time in the Fifties, America played Joseph K. at Joe McCarthy's court. Like the man in the enigmatic parable at the end of The Trial, we sat outside and waited for the law. What McCarthy presented to America in the Fifties was just such a world. We wanted him to execute judgment, to banish our demons, to provide us with a vision, a standard under which to march, and an enemy to march against. But McCarthy did not slay Ra'hab, the dragon of chaos, he only goaded it. We were left without gods or devils, heroes or villains, only the haunting suspicion that both existed. No clear, stable dramatic structure emerged, and the rules for judgment were systematically subverted. In emphasizing the darkness of the postwar world, McCarthy concentrated on what was unseeable and thereby unknowable. His promises notwithstanding, he never turned on the light. Rather he insinuated the lurking presence of "things that go bump in the night." There is no salvation here, only the articulation of anxiety. As soon as the show was over, the audience, as an audience, largely disintegrated, the residuum remaking itself on the edges of the politics of the 1960s as the John Birch Society. Only the McCarthy persona survives, precisely because of its insubstantiality, a ghost lurking about the dark places of American politics.