

INTRODUCTION



Katherine Anne Porter

(1890-1980)

Katherine Anne Porter is one of the five greatest American short story writers—with Hawthorne, Hemingway, Faulkner, and O'Connor—as measured by the number of masterpieces written. Her three brilliantly compressed short novels are among the finest in world literature, featuring the transcendent *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939). Her long novel *Ship of Fools* (1962) is the last great masterpiece of Modernism—a landmark in literary history. Porter became a legend by establishing herself as obviously a major writer with her first stories, in particular “Flowering Judas” (1930), about an idealistic American girl caught up in a corrupt Communist revolution in Mexico, a complex analysis of social types and incisive encapsulation of 20th-century global politics. “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall” (1929) is equally complex, allusive, and ironic, yet comic. “He” (1935) is symbolic holistic Realism that becomes a powerful religious allegory in the tradition of Hawthorne.

Porter resembles Hemingway in combining objectivity and apparent simplicity with subtle evocation, detailed Realism, and symbolism that develops into allegory, but she is more poetic, satirical, and ironic. Hemingway avoided figurative language to derive more power from the iceberg under the surface, whereas Porter is prolific with similes and metaphors. Porter and Hemingway are supreme stylists in their variations of prose rhythm to evoke feelings and implications—playing language like a musical instrument—or an orchestra. Porter also has the moral depth of Hawthorne, the intellectual complexity of Melville, and the psychological penetration of James. Over 50 different critics have also compared Porter to Homer, Juvenal, Horace, Brant, Dante, Swift, Sterne, Smollett, Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Balzac, Dickens, Hardy, George Eliot, George Sand, Flaubert, Maupassant, Conrad, Ibsen, O'Neill, Pound, Frost, T. S. Eliot, Joyce, Chekhov, Turgenev, Mansfield, Proust, Mann, Kafka, Woolf, Faulkner, Camus, and to the artists Bosch, Durer, Hals, and Goya. Porter has been favorably compared with more great writers than any other American, spanning the history of western civilization. This is evidence of great diversity in her subjects, characters, settings, themes, modes, tones, styles, techniques, and aesthetic effects.

Porter and Gordon are arguably the most intelligent, talented, and reliable literary analysts of modern gender relations and the liberation of women in the 20th century—egalitarian “feminists” in the best sense. Three of Porter's most outstanding short stories dramatize women coping with guilt. A psychological Realist like James in her focus on consciousness, motivation, manners and morals, she is international like

James as well, especially in her great novel *Ship of Fools*. She is also a Realist in debunking Romance and in her dark criticism of human nature. She uses techniques of Impressionism in the painterly manner of Stephen Crane, Chopin, Wharton, and Fitzgerald, and is often Expressionistic in her figurative language, satirical characterizations, and vivid descriptions. As a Modernist in the mode of *holistic realism* she synthesizes aesthetic traditions but is fundamentally a Neoclassical Realist like Hemingway and Wharton in relying especially on objectivity, irony, parallelism, and moral clarity. Her consistently implied Christian vision is overlooked or ignored by most of her secular Postmodernist critics.

BIOGRAPHY

Callie Russell Porter was born dirt poor in a two-room log cabin in Indian Creek, a frontier village in Texas, the fourth of five children. Her father Harrison Boone Porter was descended from the brother of the frontiersman Daniel Boone. He was a farmer who suffered in the economic aftermath of the Civil War. Another ancestor also was a famous explorer and frontiersman, Henry Skaggs from Kentucky. Two of her earlier ancestors fought the British in the American Revolution.

She was 2 years old when her mother died in the cabin of pneumonia after childbirth. Her father sold their farm and in 1892 he moved the family in with her Grandmother, into a small farm house in the little town of Kyle, Texas. The Grandmother, who had raised nine children and became the dominant adult influence on Porter, had bronchial problems that ran in the family. She kept her bedroom to herself and her son and four children had to share the one other bedroom. Kyle was established to be a stop on the new railroad line that replaced the Old Chisholm Trail, it grew to a population of about 500 and became the main cattle shipping point between San Antonio and Austin. Callie was educated by governesses her grandmother hired and at public school in Kyle.

PRIVATION

She grew up for nine years in an overcrowded little shack in the outland with no privacy, sleeping with her older sister or on a pallet in the dining room. She never had her own place, and she spent her life trying to find one: “a refugee from Indian Creek forever searching for the right place to live, the right place to work.” She never had any new clothes. She had to wear shabby old patched and repaired clothing and castoffs sent over by neighbors. She felt ashamed of accepting charity.

Her father proved to be a failure in every way--vain, lazy and depressed, with a murderous temper. He neglected his responsibilities to his children and was abusive to them. As a young girl, Porter tried to love her father, but he was unpredictable and superficial, setting up his daughters to be rivals and giving affection only to the one he happened to think was the prettiest at the time. Her father was patriarchal in the worst sense, whereas her Grandmother was matriarchal in both the worst and the best senses. Her Grandmother beat her: “I’d never been harmed in my life by anybody except my grandmother, who would box my ears from time to time—she didn’t really box them, she used to slap me in the face, smack, like that, and made me so damn mad that I’d wish she were dead for hours at a time.” No wonder she thought there was a red devil with long nails living in her Grandmother’s closet.

ASPIRATION

At the age of six she told a visiting clergyman that she wanted to be an actress, which so mortified her Grandmother that she took Callie out and beat her. Her Grandmother was so Victorian she thought it was sinful for even children to be naked at any time—even in the bathtub. Porter rebelled against the puritanism of her Grandmother for the rest of her life: “When I was a child I was always running away.”

She did not want to be just a housewife. She wanted a career and when she got married and had children she wanted to run things. She wanted to be strong and in control like her Grandmother, whose influence she acknowledged by adopting her name, while calling her Aunt Cat. Although she did not want to be domineering or puritanical, she did have some characteristics of her Grandmother, including a powerful uncompromising personality, belief in hard work and impatience with weak men. Aunt Cat taught Callie to believe in God with absolute conviction and she set an example of Christian altruism, moral duty, and

action for social justice. She taught her to take responsibility. When some local Mexicans joined one of their revival meetings, her Protestant congregation distrusted them because they were Catholics and spoke Spanish. A deacon asked the strangers to leave and that made Aunt Cat so furious that she led the Porters out of the church after the Mexicans.

One of Callie's favorite activities was staging little plays either with miniature figures or by acting them out herself. In particular, she liked to play Joan of Arc and get tied up for burning by her playmates. When the circus arrived in the neighborhood, Callie organized the available children into a play circus, trying daredevil stunts riding bareback on mules and hogs and performing dangerous trapeze tricks in the barn loft of the Schlemmer family. She seems to have had fun, but she said later that all her dreams were nightmares and that "I was an unhappy restless child, and have no pleasant memories...But it certainly does not matter, for my unhappiness was not from my circumstances but from within myself."

GRANDMOTHER DIES

At age eleven her feelings of loss and alienation increased when her Grandmother died. The Porter girls had nothing to wear to the funeral and a neighbor woman made sashes to disguise their shabby dresses. The Grandmother and the family influences on Porter in her childhood are the basis of the first four sketches in "The Old Order," the beginnings of the Miranda stories. Miranda is not Porter, she is more representative, upper rather than lower class, and simpler. When she does not name her women protagonists, Porter means to separate them from Miranda to indicate that they are not the same person, but most critics ignore that and identify them all with Miranda.

In the fall of 1902 she and her family—her shiftless father, sisters, and a brother—became vagabonds living off relatives they visited in Texas. During this period Callie attended various schools sporadically, including a convent school in New Orleans in 1903-04.

SAN ANTONIO

After the death of the Grandmother, young Callie rebelled like the wayward daughter of a minister. She went drinking and dancing and cavorting with boys. She beat the boys at playing cards and gave up the idea of becoming a nun and begged her father to allow her to go to San Antonio and study to be an actress. In response, as soon as her sister graduated from high school, their lazy father decided to quit farming and move to San Antonio, fifty miles away. He sold the shack in Lyle for ten dollars. At the time, San Antonio was full of political exiles from Mexico and had a Mexican atmosphere. The family settled into a small apartment and lived a disorderly life. Callie and her sister attended the nearby Thomas School, a small private institution that was Christian with a Methodist tendency, 1904-05.

FORMAL EDUCATION

Callie did not like having to wear a uniform to school, she felt confined by all the rules and was a poor student, especially in math. She made excellent marks in history, literature and composition, but she got a D in everything else except deportment, which was often lower. She described herself at that time as "vain, self-conscious and mad for love." She was trained in singing, elocution, acting, good manners and deep curtsies. "I wanted to dance, I wanted to play the piano, I sang, I drew."

She attended chaperoned school dances with boys from a nearby military academy: "We were told never to look a gentleman right in the eyes for more than a second." She took a special interest in music, attended concerts given by the Ladies Musical Club of San Antonio, and acted for six weeks with a summer stock company which formed in Electric Park. However, she knew nothing of finances or practical matters. Her father did not support his daughters and they had to get jobs to support themselves.

By the age of fifteen Porter had learned enough to become a teacher herself in Victoria, Texas, where she and her sister gave lessons in music, physical culture and dramatic reading. Throughout her life thereafter, Porter felt defensive about her limited formal education and ashamed of her attendance at Thomas School: "There is a rumor that I once went to school in a thoroughly dinky girls school by a lake in the deep

suburbs in an unknown area that I was completely unconscious of and which had no definite place in my life." Understandably, Porter wanted to forget the miserable circumstances of her childhood, yet she relied on memories in writing her fiction.

CREATIVE PROCESS

Porter was reborn and recreated herself in various ways during her life, in the traditions of Christ and the reborn soul, Ben Franklin and the self-made person, Modernism and the self-made artist, Existentialism and the created self, Transcendental Feminism and the independent woman, Hollywood and the make-over. She had a poetic mind that compressed and transformed the literal into the figurative when she consulted her memory. To the serious fiction writer, the literal fact is not as important as its meaning, just as to the saint the material is not as important as the spiritual.

Porter's literary friends such as Glenway Wescott understood that her "fabrications" about her life were part of her creative process. As she put it, "I shall try to tell the truth, but the result will be fiction"; "No memory is really faithful"; "My fiction is reportage, only I do something to it"; "My material consists of memory, legend, personal experience, and acquired knowledge. They combine in a constant process of re-creation." Her hostile biographer, the dogmatic Feminist Joan Givner, tries to discredit Porter for telling such stories as that "she had eloped from a New Orleans convent when she was sixteen and had married a man much older than herself who shut her up."

Porter here compresses the meaning of her experiences as fictionalized in Miranda in *Old Mortality*. Her statement is not a lie, it is an ironic allegory expressing truths: (1) "New Orleans" is a city that represents the world beyond her knowledge, depicted as corrupt in her story "Magic"—more symbolic and evocative than Lufkin, the obscure town known to her where in mere fact she actually got married; (2) the "convent" such as the one she attended in 1903-04 is a symbol of confinement; (3) "eloping" characterizes the marriage as her impulsive immature rebellion in search of freedom; (4) a "man much older than herself" identifies her husband with much greater experience and with the Old Order—a man who returns her to confinement, ironically; and (5) getting "shut up" again is the consequence of her foolish mistake. Porter displays her integrity by accepting responsibility rather than blaming others, unlike her Feminist biographer Givner, who does not understand her and calls her a liar.

Likewise dumb is criticism of her statement that "I belong to the guilt-ridden white-pillar crowd myself, but it just didn't rub off on me." She is not claiming to have had an aristocratic background herself literally, she is accepting southern white guilt for slavery and the Civil War while repudiating racism and the aristocratic Old Order. Porter enlarged her vision by identifying herself with the whole South—all classes, not just poor white Texans. The aristocratic social order of the Old South is part of her past as a white southerner, part of her vision as a fiction writer, and part of her burden as a modern woman. Her white ancestors, regardless of class, participated in and to some extent benefited from that Old Order, and passed on its prejudices, as seen best in *Old Mortality*. To share its values is to "belong" to the aristocratic order in the broadest sense. In "The Old Order" Porter is purging white guilt.

Modernists were prone to misinformation about their personal lives because they believed in re-creation of themselves as artists. Sherwood Anderson published three autobiographies that contradict each other. Ford Madox Ford was famous for making up stories about himself. William Faulkner returned home from World War I wearing a Canadian Air Force uniform and limping with a cane. He fostered by never correcting the legend that he was a war hero injured when his plane got shot down in action in France, whereas in fact he was injured when he got drunk and crashed a training plane in Canada after the Armistice kept him from reaching the front. Friendly critics have laughed at the legend as a humorous tall tale that makes the author more interesting and entertaining. Critics such as Givner have not been tolerant of Porter because they are hostile Feminists and Atheists.

READING

"I was reading Shakespeare's sonnets when I was thirteen years old, and I'm perfectly certain that they made the most profound impression upon me of anything I ever read....That was the turning point of my life, when I read the Shakespeare sonnets, and then all at one blow, all of Dante." She also read Homer and

“all kinds of poetry.” Porter read far more and better literature than most English professors ever do today. “I was incredibly influenced by Montaigne when I was very young...[and I read] the entire set of Voltaire’s philosophical dictionary...all the eighteenth-century novelists, through Jane Austen...And I discovered for myself *Wuthering Heights*; I think I read that book every year of my life for fifteen years. I simply adored it. Henry James and Thomas Hardy were really my introduction to modern literature.” She added that she felt she had not been educated by “schools at all but by five writers: Henry James, James Joyce, W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound.” She also learned languages, reading Baudelaire and Rimbaud in French and Rilke in German.

FIRST MARRIAGE

Her first groom was John Koontz, a 21-year-old clerk for the Southern Railway Company who was the son of a wealthy Texas ranching family. Rather than eloping, Porter and her sister Gay had a double wedding performed by a Methodist minister in 1906. Porter took instruction from a Catholic priest, was baptized in 1910, and despite some disagreements with the institutional Church, remained a Catholic all her life, never wavering in her faith in God. “I have a deep sense of religion and have had religious training.” The book she kept at her bedside throughout her life, replaced a number of times when a copy wore out, was *The Confessions of St. Augustine*. Meanwhile, Koontz was abusive to her: The divorce petition signed by him states that “defendant threw plaintiff down a stair way of their home, breaking her right ankle”; “struck plaintiff in the temple with a clothes brush, knocking her down and rendering her unconscious for a space of three hours”; “struck plaintiff with his fist, causing her great physical pain.” She forgave him, though he resembles the violent jerk William Denny from Texas in *Ship of Fools*. “At that time I was too young for some of the troubles I was having.”

MOVIES

In 1914 at the age of 24 she rode the train to Chicago. “When I left they were all certain I was going to live an immoral life.” She got work as a journalist and then as an extra and bit player in silent films: “The newspaper sent me over to the old S. and A. movie studio to do a story. But I got into the wrong line...and I found myself in a courtroom scene with Francis X. Bushman.” She was hired as an extra but soon tired of it, discovering her constitutional frailty. She lacked physical stamina and could not withstand the nervous stress. Producers offered her work if she followed them to Hollywood, but she declined, saying: “I have more serious things to do.” After six months of show business, exhausted and discouraged, she went to live with her abandoned sister Gay and her children in Louisiana and supported the family by giving poetry readings and singing ballads on the Lyceum circuit, relying on ministers to secure engagements for her. Always inclined to overwork herself, she had a breakdown.

TUBERCULOSIS

Within a few weeks of performing and riding trains, malnourished and weary and broke, Porter fell very ill. X-rays showed that she had tuberculosis. She had no money to pay for a good sanatorium and had to settle for a county hospital near Dallas, a dirty overcrowded “pest house” for the poor and dying. She was left in a ward full of dying women and got almost no attention—feeling abandoned in a nightmare. Moved by the sight of children in the hospital, hobbling around on crutches or slumped in wheelchairs or wasting away on cots, Porter got up and read them stories and made up some of her own. There were no funds available and when public officials failed to respond to her appeals for help, Porter persuaded the *Dallas News* to do a feature article on the afflicted children, which inspired hundreds of donations of books, records, tablets, pencils, crayons, paints, sweaters, socks, fruit, and candy. Porter taught them songs, but the terminal children were too weak to sing and only able to whisper. She was photographed with seventeen of her student patients, all of whom died within two years.

Porter was rescued from the charity hospital by her brother Paul, who sent her money, one of many times throughout her life when she was helped in emergencies by relatives and close friends. She was hospitalized in Texas from fall 1915 to spring 1917, spending time in three different tuberculosis hospitals and living in rooming houses for the tubercular. She remained at the Carlsbad Sanatorium near San Angelo for a year, for eight months flat on her back. Her health improved enough that afterward at Woodlawn Hospital in Dallas she was able to work as a part-time assistant as well as being a patient, assigned to look after the tubercular children there. She formed the children into a little school and taught them by using

books and curriculum from the public schools adapted to the special needs of the sick. She decorated the children's wards with cheerful bright colors. She wrote children's stories and articles for Texas newspapers and did volunteer work for the Red Cross.

FORGOTTEN MARRIAGES

In 1917 after divorcing Koontz, according to Darlene Unrue, while she was feeling weak and broke and desperate, Porter married and divorced T. Otto Taskett, then married and divorced Carl Clinton von Pless (*Remembrances* 2010, vxi). According to Givner, Porter said that she met an Englishman in Dallas who begged her to marry him, and that she did so in order to comfort him before he was sent back to England to join the army. She said the marriage was not consummated and that he was killed in the war (*A Life*, revised 1991: 113-14). "I have no hidden marriages," she said once. "They just slip my mind."

JOURNALISM

While bedridden with tuberculosis, Porter decided to become a writer. She worked first as a reporter and society columnist for the *Fort Worth Critic*. Still weak and queasy, she was advised by a doctor to move to some place with clean air. She rented a cabin on Cheyenne Mountain near Colorado Springs and promptly decided to climb up to the top of the mountain. Wearing just a flimsy dress and moccasins, she climbed until she slumped over gasping for breath. At that moment she got chased by a bear. She made it down the mountain and collapsed for several days afterward, then she came all the way back down and rented a room in Denver, where she got hired by the *Rocky Mountain News*. She interviewed celebrities and reviewed books, plays and concerts, inclining to sarcasm that provoked some readers.

ADAM

Male reporters wanted to date their beautiful new colleague but instead she began to date a handsome army lieutenant from nearby Fort Logan. His name was Alexander. She called him Adam, throughout her life and in the great short novel based on this romance, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*. The relationship was brief and unconsummated, ending with the world flu pandemic of 1918. Ambulance sirens wailed all day and all night. Denver hospitals were filled to capacity. Alexander nursed Porter through her illness until she could be moved to an open hospital bed. He was so self-sacrificing, attentive and sensitive that she fell in love with him. Their youth and the brevity of the relationship also made it possible for her to idealize him as the perfect man. But while taking care of her, he caught the flu and died. As it turned out he gave his life for her, like Christ. Adam is the best proof that, unlike her bitter grandmother and the radical Feminists, Porter never hated men. In fact she fell in love many times.

DEATH AND REBIRTH

Porter ran a fever of 105 for 9 days and had a near-death experience. The *Rocky Mountain News* set up her obituary and the Porter family made arrangements for the disposal of her body. She was left to die behind screens in a corridor of the overcrowded hospital. Some young interns like angels in white coats noticed her dying. They decided to give her an experimental shot of strychnine—and as if by a miracle, it worked! In *Pale Horse* Miranda compares herself to Lazarus, implying that she *did* die and was brought back to life by Jesus: As Porter explained, "I had seen my heavenly vision and the world was pretty dull after that. My mood for several years thereafter was that it was not a world worth living in. And yet one has faith, one has the inner core of strength that comes from somewhere, probably inherited from someone. Throughout my life there have been times during the day when I have both an intense wish to die and later an eagerness that can't wait to see the next day. In fact, if I hadn't been tough as an alley cat, I wouldn't be here today." The first time she tried to sit up in her bed she fell over and fractured an elbow. When she got discharged from the hospital more frail than ever, she was limping from phlebitis, carrying her fractured elbow in a sling, and completely bald. Her hair grew back white and stayed white. She had the memory of true love lost, and an experience of the afterlife: "It seems to me true that I died then. I died once and I have never feared death since."

GREENWICH VILLAGE

She moved to bohemian Greenwich Village in New York City in 1919, the year Sherwood Anderson revolutionized the short story in *Winesburg, Ohio*. She lived in the Village intermittently throughout the 1920s, its Golden Age for artists. "I would not have missed being there just when I was there for anything," she said. For awhile she made a living as a ghost writer, children's story writer and writer of publicity releases for movies. She had joined the Little Theater in Denver and the managing director fell in love with her and chased her all the way across the country to Greenwich Village. She tossed his engagement ring down to him from her apartment window. She met a lot of Marxist radicals and Communists in the Village who talked about revolution but never did anything. Like many altruistic writers at the time, Porter sympathized with the Leftists because they claimed to be dedicated to helping the poor. Rather than just sit around in cafes talking about revolution, Porter joined one.

MEXICO

She got a job on a magazine in Mexico in 1920: "I just got up and bolted. I went running off on that wild escapade to Mexico, where I attended, you might say, and assisted at, in my own modest way, a revolution ...though actually I went to Mexico to study the Aztec and Mayan art designs." Though mainly self-educated, during her life Porter was hired as an expert on Indian art, contemporary Mexican art, modern painting, dancing, music, elocution, poetry, fiction, creative writing, and literary history. The slow troop train she rode to Mexico City was packed with armed soldiers, had passengers crowded onto the roofs of all the coaches and included a Pullman coach brothel for officers.

In Mexico she wrote for *El Heraldo de Mexico*, ghost wrote a book for a friend and edited two issues of *Magazine of Mexico*. She became acquainted with the new President Obregon, cabinet members, labor leaders, revolutionaries, and artists. At the same time, she worked in secret as a mole for the Communist revolutionaries in Mexico City, a beautiful fragile young American girl slinking through dark alleys in the middle of the night delivering messages and marijuana and other drugs to prisoners. In daylight she and her naïve friend Mary Doherty, the model for Laura in "Flowering Judas," carried to them baskets of fruit, reading material, cigarettes, and sleeping pills.

At night she might have feared getting caught and shot, she might have feared getting assaulted and raped, but she did not fear death. Considering how much she risked and how often, Porter is among the bravest American writers. She said her favorite people in Mexico were the bandits. When she got accused of being a Communist and listed for deportation, she avoided arrest by leaving the country, but she risked returning on visits thereafter. Her disillusionment with the corrupt Communists in Mexico extended to the Communists and other political activists in the United States. "Political history is a vile mess," she concluded. Mexico provided the material for what she considered her first published story, "Maria Concepcion" (1922), her satire of the famous mural painter Diego Rivera, "The Martyr" (1923), her further analysis of gender relations in Mexico, "Virgin Violeta" (1924), her most famous story, "Flowering Judas" (1930), and her brilliant summation of decadent Mexico, "Hacienda" (1934).

LATIN AMERICAN AFFAIRS

Porter had an affair in 1921 with the poet Salomon de la Selva that ended with abortion and her biting parody of his romantic poetry, attacking his predatory sexism: "Variation 1001: To the Foolish Virgins Who Aren't Gathering Roses" (1922). Her poems are very revealing and startling in quality but they were not up to her standards—as set by the likes of Shakespeare and Dante—and she wrote poetry mainly for pleasure and creative experiment: *Katherine Anne Porter's Poetry* (1996). She published only 11 poems and 21 translations, but she wrote several hundred, destroying or losing most of them.

In 1924 she had an affair with Francisco Aguilera, a handsome Yale graduate student from Chile, and got pregnant, but the baby was stillborn. Then she had an affair with a Polish expatriate named Hieronim Retinger, a friend of Joseph Conrad, but he was in love with the controversial journalist Jane Anderson. Porter *may* have had an affair with Diego Rivera. She was also attracted to Puerto Carillo, a handsome Mayan Indian and congressman from Yucatan who took her dancing, but he got assassinated. Still rebelling

against the puritanism of her family, she had her lovers and husbands take nude photographs of her and mailed copies to members of her family in defiance of their disapproval. Ideally, she believed, “The flesh in real love is one of the many bridges to the spirit.”

MODERNISM

Porter moved on to other jobs in Greenwich Village, then back to Texas, and then back again to New York. Meanwhile the Modernist literary movement burst into mature bloom in London and Paris with “The Waste Land” by T. S. Eliot and *Ulysses* by James Joyce in 1922. The new cinema had begun in Berlin and the Little Theater movement in New York City was producing Expressionist plays by Eugene O’Neill. The independent Porter avoided the chic expatriate scene in Paris, considering it pretentious—especially as represented by Gertrude Stein. Porter appreciated some of Stein’s early writing and her importance as an influence, but when her friend the novelist Caroline Gordon and her husband the poet Allen Tate took Porter to visit Stein, Porter grew disillusioned: “She just ate her way through life like a big slug, and digested it all in wads, and called it genius.” Even so, she learned Modernism primarily from studying Henry James, Stein, Pound, Joyce, Yeats, and Eliot.

AESTHETICS

Neoclassicism is the foundation of Porter’s aesthetics. Her stories regularly display all 16 characteristics of Neoclassicism and are distinguished especially by economy—exceptional compression, especially in her short novels—proportion, intellect, grace, irony, and wit. She is famous for the grace of her style and the many allusions, parallels, and allegorical patterns in her fiction are expressions of intellect. That Porter is one of the most intelligent writers in literary history is evident in her ability to write realistic allegories of symbols such as “Flowering Judas,” “He,” and *Ship of Fools*. Many of her critics—mostly the Feminists—are ideologues who are too literal-minded to detect irony and consequently misread stories such as “The Tilting of Granny Weatherall.” The only American writer who is as abundantly and consistently ironic as Porter is Stephen Crane. Her dominant mode of fiction is psychological Realism in the tradition of Henry James, enhanced by techniques of Modernism.

Porter is Modernist in her dedication to art and to spiritual reality as formulated in religion: “There are only two possibilities for any real order: in art and in religion.” Her fiction exhibits nearly all 25 general characteristics of Modernism. Her mode is *holistic realism* as contrasted to *intellectual expressionism*, grouped with Hemingway, Faulkner, Welty, and O’Connor. Although she is one of the most intellectual of writers, her fiction consistently evokes a vivid illusion of real life and avoids the expressionistic extremes of Faulkner or O’Neill. She submerges most allusions and expresses ideas implicitly in symbols, allegory, and irony while exhibiting all the characteristics of Realism. Her narrative structures remain predominantly linear and her allusions are mostly to the Bible, a very well-known source, rather than expressing a private system of belief, in contrast to Pound and Yeats. Her values and themes are consistently Christian and there are more Christ-evoking figures in Porter’s stories than in any other writers except Hawthorne, Melville, and Faulkner: “I have a great deal of religious symbolism in my stories because I have a very deep sense of religion and also I have a religious training.”

Most of *The Sound and the Fury* and all of *As I Lay Dying* consist of chapters rendering the stream of consciousness of a single character. The narrator has disappeared. In contrast, Porter slides in and out of the minds of various characters and back and forth in time in a continuous flow of narration from an omniscient perspective even when the narrator is merely human. Objective and invisible, her narrators have an authority analogous to the Holy Ghost—the spirit of Truth. The supreme example is *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, one of the greatest short novels of all time. One of Porter’s achievements as a Modernist is to have remained so readable—her most ambitious masterpiece became a bestseller made into a movie—while consistently producing fiction of the highest literary quality. She is skilled at revealing essential facts of a plot gradually in the most revealing order. She is a master of comic understatement, caricature, and irony. A story such as “A Day’s Work” becomes increasingly comical the more the reader discerns the multitude of ironies. The reader should always expect irony at the end of a Porter story.

WRITING

During the 1920s she supported herself with freelance writing, editing, and book reviewing. “I had spent fifteen years at least learning to write. I practiced writing in every possible way that I could. I wrote a pastiche of other people, imitating Dr. Johnson and Laurence Sterne, and Petrarch and Shakespeare’s sonnets, and then I tried writing my own way”; “For many years I had to work up a story slowly, and with many revisions...but I’ve learned to be a first-draft writer”; “A writer may be inspired occasionally: that’s his good luck; but he doesn’t learn to write by inspiration: he works at it”; “If I didn’t know the ending of my story, I wouldn’t begin. I always write my last lines, my last paragraph first, and then I go back and work towards it. I know where I’m going. I know what my goal is. And how I get there is God’s grace”; “A story is like something you wind out of yourself. Like a spider, it is a web you weave, and you love your story *like a child.*” [italics added]

BIRTHING STORIES

After the publication of her first stories deriving from her experiences in Mexico, many of Porter’s stories had a long gestation period between an experience, the conception of meaning that developed from it, and the birth of a story. More complex organisms require longer gestation than simpler ones: “My work is done at a subterranean level and fragments of the work come to the surface. I record them as they come up.” “That Tree” was published about 3 years after her experiences; “Flowering Judas” and “The Leaning Tower” about 9 years after; *Old Mortality* about 12 years after; *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* about 20 years after; “The Grave” about 25 years after; *Ship of Fools* 31 years after; “The Witness” and “The Last Leaf” about 35 years after; *Noon Wine* about 37 years after; “The Circus” about 40 years after; “The Source” and “Holiday” about 45 years after; “The Fig Tree” about 62 years after. It is not surprising that it took her 21 years to complete *Ship of Fools*, it was natural. Other stories such as “Rope” and “Theft,” no less complex, formed sooner like the Mexican stories. Many unpublished works, including a biography of Cotton Mather—over 40 stories she said once—she never brought to full term. They had to be perfect.

She often allowed herself to be distracted from her writing because she could feel that what she wanted to write was still gestating: “It took me twenty-one years to get that novel written, and I quit every chance I found. But it won.” She always hated deadlines. Too often they were premature. Aware that their gestation was often very long, sometimes so long she forgot about some stories in progress, Porter liked to emphasize how rapidly she delivered some of her stories once they were ready—in hours, or a week. Once at a party in Paris given by Ford Madox Ford she won a contest by composing a sonnet in only *ten minutes!* In contrast, her career had many long gestations. She was 40 years old before publishing her first book. She published a slim collection of stories featuring “Flowering Judas” in 1930 and her literary career blossomed into full bloom all at once. It was one of the most auspicious debuts in literary history. Suddenly she became an inspiration to aspiring writers. “I went to Europe in 1931 an unknown, and returned to find myself a celebrity.” But then she did not publish her long novel and become a bestseller until she was 72. She said that she only spent about two years actually writing the novel, and that the other 19 years since she began it she had to spend making a living.

GERMANY

Porter turned her attention from Mexico to Germany, where the most significant events in the world were developing: “The Germans have *marched first* in every instance for the past three European wars.” As dramatized in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1938), Porter felt wounded herself by World War I. She held the Germans accountable and set out to counterattack the Nazis for World War II in *Ship of Fools*, “the story of my first voyage to Europe in 1931. We embarked on an old German ship at Vera Cruz and we landed in Bremerhaven twenty-eight days later.”

Critics have compared Porter and Pressley, her husband at the time, to Jenny and David the American painters in the novel, but Jenny has no talent. Porter lived in Berlin for five months during 1931-32 when the Nazis were coming to power and is virtually equivalent to Charles the *talented* American painter who visits Germany in “The Leaning Tower” (1944). She witnessed torchlight Nazi marches and attacks on Jewish businesses and synagogues. She saw that Hitler was becoming “a great national hero and the exact mirror of the popular mind.” Her husband at the time was half German. She grew up with German friends

in Texas and observed Germans in Mexico as well as in a Germany that would raise Hitler to power the next year, in 1933: "I had seen these criminals—these clowns—like Hitler, and was stricken by an idea: if people like this could take over the world!"

She set out to expose "the collusion of evil that enables a creature like Mussolini, or Hitler." In Berlin she was invited by Sigrid Schultz, the bureau chief of the *Chicago Tribune*, to a dinner party where the honored guests were Hitler, Goring and Goebbels. Hitler stayed home to recover from straining his throat screaming at his rabid followers. As Porter witnessed his rise to power she became critical of Schultz for being so chummy with Nazis. Schultz stopped inviting her to parties. Porter thought that Hitler was "the most awful, insignificant, underbred, unhealthy-looking creature I had ever seen." Seated across from Goring at the dinner party, "I particularly noticed the sweaty roll of fat that bulged over his tight shirt collar. He had that piggish look I've described in 'The Leaning Tower'." After dinner she sat by the fire with Goring and "he explained to me what they were going to do to the Jews and I said, 'Well, you know, I wonder how you dare to do it because it's never done any good... It does do great damage to the country.... As a matter of fact, they help build up every country they ever live in'."

According to Schultz, Goring was attracted to Porter, "fascinated by her looks and determined to try his luck with her." Goring took Porter to a nightclub, tried clumsily to kiss her, then tried to date her again--but she avoided him. In fact, she left Berlin abruptly. Enemies such as Givner her radical Feminist biographer have slandered Porter by calling her anti-Semitic in *Ship of Fools*, one of the most powerful indictments of anti-Semitism ever published. That accusation is comparable to calling Mark Twain a racist in *Huckleberry Finn*. It is also hypocritical coming from a radical Feminist whose ideology is anti-male—true bigotry directed against half the human race including male Jews. As Porter said, "People love the right to hate each other with moral sanction."

RISING STAR

She married Pressley the diplomat in Paris in 1933, with Ford Madox Ford serving as best man. They often lived apart. She lived in Spain and Switzerland, then settled with her husband in Paris, her favorite city. For awhile she was one of the many expatriate Americans who frequented the bookstore Shakespeare and Company, along with Pound, Hemingway, and Joyce. Ford based the lovers in his novel *Vive le Roy* upon Porter and Pressley, featuring her as a young American artist named Cassandra Mather, an allusion to her unfinished biography of Cotton Mather, which reflected her own puritanism.

Her collection *Flowering Judas and Other Stories* was expanded and republished in 1935, increasing her reputation among writers and critics. In 1939 she published three short novels that were recognized as masterpieces: *Old Mortality*, *Noon Wine*, and *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*. Robert Penn Warren called them 3 of the 20 best short novels in world literature. Then *The Leaning Tower and Other Stories* was published in 1944, containing more masterpieces, raising her status still higher and provoking more petty detractors. Porter moved to Washington D.C. that year—"I must have lived in 45 places"--and served as a fellow at the Library of Congress. In 1945-47, broke again, she worked as a scriptwriter in Hollywood, where she hated the poor taste of executives and the censorship. "You can't hold yourself in contempt and do anything worthwhile." She liked Greer Garson, Judy Garland—one of her fans--and Harpo Marx. She considered Charlie Chaplin an "odious little beast." In 1948 she quit and toured Midwest universities as lecturer and teacher in writing workshops.

Her stories were too literary (too good) for mass circulation national magazines that paid well and she published almost entirely in little magazines that paid virtually nothing. She made very little money from her writing until *Ship of Fools* when she was 72 years old. She had no savings at all. When single she lived mainly on grants, advances, writing reviews and essays, and teaching, while appearing frequently on radio and television. She enjoyed giving readings and lectures as dramatic performances, expounding "in that magnificent husky Katherine Anne Porter voice." She wore flamboyant wide-brimmed hats, stylish clothes, pearls, and long white gloves to match her elegantly coifed white hair. A woman student said that Porter was "to generations of women, all over... a lively patron saint of literature." One student said "Her presence was hypnotic. She was always the dainty and delicate bird with a backbone of steel." Another described her

as “like a peacock that had fluttered down in a barnyard.” A faculty member said that on campus her student admirers were called her “fervents.”

FEMALE PERSPECTIVE

Porter’s fiction has the added interest of being written from a female perspective, focused on conflicts that are common among modern women, in particular following one’s own nature versus nurturing others--independence versus committed love. Her Miranda stories are the female equivalent of Hemingway’s Nick Adams stories. Her short novels *Old Mortality* and *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939) are the best humanistic “feminist” accounts of growing up female in America in the 20th century. As in Eliot’s “The Waste Land” (1922), the worst condition is the inability or refusal to love, famously illustrated by Laura in “Flowering Judas.” Porter is an egalitarian Realist in her depiction of the genders, a humanist rather than a dogmatic Feminist, seeing men and women as victims of each other. In this context, one of her funniest satires is *A Defense of Circe* (1955), in which she sides with the Cyclops, who is robbed of his sheep by Odysseus and his men, and Circe, who merely causes the men to expose themselves as the swine they are by nature. Hawthorne and Eudora Welty likewise side with Circe.

MARRIAGES AND MISCARRIAGES

In 1926 Porter married again, investing in a handsome Englishman named Stock, who looked great in a Royal Flying Corps uniform, but he proved to be as dull as a post and gave her gonorrhea, leading to a hysterectomy. By then she is thought to have already had several miscarriages and the one stillbirth. She always regretted being childless. She mothered children at every opportunity, going out of her way to play and sing with them, and treated her nieces as daughters. In 1927 her lover was Miguel Covarrubias, a famous caricaturist 16 years younger than her. In 1928 she had an affair with Matthew Josephson, a New York editor and married philanderer. She divorced Stock and in 1932 had an affair in Paris with William Hale, a first novelist 20 years younger. In 1933 she published *Katherine Anne Porter’s French Song-Book* and married Pressley the diplomat, 13 years younger. Pressley treated her well but he was indecisive and incompatible. She divorced him in 1938 and married Albert Erskine, Jr., business manager of a literary magazine, 20 years younger and too bossy. In 1944 she fell in love with a married painter named Charles Shannon but he would not leave his wife.

She had a brief relationship with another younger man, Herbert Schaumann, but was soon disillusioned and aghast. She tried to have an affair with a homosexual friend she lived with for awhile, the photographer George Platt Lynes, but was unsuccessful. At the artists colony of Yaddo in 1951 she tried again to convert a homosexual, the much younger novelist William Goyen, but lost out again. At the age of 72 she had an affair with her Italian eye doctor, but soon saw through him. In 1966, at age 76, she fell in love for the last time, with Elijah Barrett Prettyman, a married Washington lawyer 35 years younger. Her lifelong friend the poet Allen Tate, with whom she had a brief affair, once said defensively, “She is always moving: in fact, she is trapped in a cycle of romantic emotions that repeat themselves about every five years.” It is true that she was always moving: In the fifty years between 1910 and 1960 she moved from one domicile to another at least 50 times and by her own estimate changed lovers almost as often.

Porter saw her romances differently than Tate did: “If you ever treat a man as if he were an archangel, he can’t ever consent to being treated like a human being again”; “They couldn’t live with me because I was a writer and, now and then, writing took first place...They felt neglected. I don’t blame them”; “I suppose the contrary demands of career—my husbands’ and mine—got in the way”; “No marriage was worth giving up what I had”; “I was just a little ahead of my time.”

The southern novelist Andrew Lytle, one of the “Nashville Fugitives,” reminisced about Porter to me one afternoon in Eugene, Oregon where he was teaching in the summer session of 1960. In the rumpled white linen suit of a southern gentleman, sipping bourbon, he described Katherine Anne Porter as a friend of his who was greatly respected by all writers and pursued by many. Lytle appeared to love her himself. He thought she had so many affairs and marriages because writing was extremely difficult for her and emotional relationships disrupted her concentration. He said that at one point she claimed to have had “four

husbands and thirty-seven lovers.” In retrospect she called love the “most important example of how the imagination continually outruns the creature it inhabits.”

CRITICS

Many critics of Porter cannot be trusted. She was one of the last Modernists and many of her critics are Postmodernists—dogmatic Feminists and Atheists—who detest her politics and disdain her religion. The worst of these critics falsify her work and her character. Feminists dislike Porter because she disliked them. In 1991 Joan Givner published a revised edition of her 1982 biography in order to smear Porter. She was given a weapon by Elinor Langer, a radical Feminist on the editorial board of *The Nation*, who was researching a biography of the Feminist fiction writer Josephine Herbst. Langer is so far overboard to the left that she continues to deny the guilt of Alger Hiss, the infamous Communist agent in the U.S. State Department sent to prison for perjury, the most famous spy in American history. Without proof, Langer accuses Porter of being guilty of treason to the Left: “The shocking story was given currency [by Langer] that Porter in a 1942 interview with the F.B.I. had turned informer.” That is, she told the truth when questioned by the F.B.I.: “She had given details about her longtime friend’s activities as a Soviet courier, an opponent of the American form of government and a follower of Stalin.”

Givner emphasizes “the enormity of the betrayal” and claims that “Porter’s version of Herbst’s activities was false. Langer’s research into the F.B.I. files is meticulous, and there is no reason to doubt her charge.” Reasons to doubt her charge: (1) According to the biographer Kenneth Lynn in *The Washington Post* (12 August 1984) the F.B.I. report on the Porter interview was “error-ridden.” (2) The F.B.I. background investigation of Herbst as a whole concluded that what Porter is alleged to have said was *true*, and more: that Herbst was married to a Communist courier, that she lobbied for the admission of Communist aliens into the United States, that she belonged to half a dozen Communist front organizations, that she voted Communist, and that she was a “great admirer of Stalin.” (3) Herbst was one of the many Communist agents hired by liberals in the government; consequently in 1942 she was fired from her job writing for the agency that evolved into the C.I.A. because she wanted to overthrow the democratic government of the United States. (4) We do not know what Porter actually said in the F.B.I. interview because Givner does not quote her from the report. What is she hiding?

(5) Givner claims that Porter made “serious charges [that] had the potential of destroying completely Herbst’s career and chances of finding work,” as if Porter was the only witness interviewed by the F.B.I., and as if Herbst should not be held responsible for treason. Givner is a Canadian leftist who supports treason against the United States. (6) Moreover, Porter repeatedly expressed severe criticism of the U.S. government’s investigations because she believed government officials were more numerous, dangerous and fascist than the Communists, making it unlikely that in any F.B.I. interview she would volunteer information. (7) Givner sides with a Communist traitor against a patriotic American: She vehemently condemns Porter for failing to *lie* to protect Herbst, discrediting herself as a truthful source of biography or anything else. (8) As an advocate of lies, Givner freely lies about Porter throughout her biography. (9) Givner expresses a vindictive malice toward Porter. She takes revenge upon her for being an independent woman rather than a dogmatic radical Feminist like herself. Joan Givner speaks for the academic police state called Political Correctness.

Without *any* evidence at all, quoting Langer but not Porter, Givner agrees with Langer that “Porter was motivated by cold-blooded malice and delighted by the thought of destroying her friend.” Givner expresses regret that attacking Porter on behalf of Herbst “in this preface rather than in the text itself gives it undue prominence. On the other hand, the prominence is perhaps justified since it is a key incident, astonishing in itself and also because the abhorrence of such an act is a recurrent theme in Porter’s work.” That is to say, I want to prejudice you against Porter at the outset of my biography, to persuade you that she was a liar and a hypocrite. Givner goes so far as to use the word “collusion” in accusing Porter of betrayal, alluding to the phrase Porter used in explaining the theme of *Ship of Fools*—“collusion with evil.” Adding to all her slander, Givner also implies that Porter was a hypocrite in her dislike of lesbians: “Elinor Langer notes that ‘Josie [Herbst] hinted at this time to Porter that some physical comfort would not come amiss’.” Porter was known to be angered by lesbian advances, yet in order to enlarge and intensify her false allegation of

betrayal, Givner hints by tone and the juxtaposition of events that Porter was influenced to separate from her then husband because of a lesbian affair with Herbst.

An unsuccessful fiction writer herself, Givner feels competitive with Porter. She suggests that both she and Herbst are more intelligent than Porter and declares that Porter “was a little threatened by the well-educated, well-informed, articulate women who were now speaking out”—radical Feminists like Herbst and herself, that is. Givner strikes an arrogant pose of being above criticism: “Let me say in passing that I think the practice of having fiction writers review biographies is akin to having fundamentalist preachers review books on the great vineyards of France.” Givner is boastful and proud to think that writers are afraid of her: “Fiction writers often suffer from acute fear (biographobia) of the skill that is the hallmark of literary biography—the uncovering of repressed motivations in the fiction.” Givner demonstrates no such skill. Her interpretations of stories are among the worst that exist. On the whole the most trustworthy critics of Porter are fellow writers, not academics like Givner. Porter trusted Givner to write her biography fairly, certainly without malice. The real betrayal here is by Givner.

The slander by Langer and Givner was increased by Robert Brinkmeyer, a consistently unreliable critic: “She apparently provided damning information—most of it made up—to the F.B.I., which was then investigating her friend Josephine Herbst.” Brinkmeyer cites Langer and Givner as his authorities, he did not see the F.B.I. report and cannot know to what extent if at all Porter was guilty of “cooperation” with the F.B.I., whether she “made up” information or whether it was “damning.” Based on slander such as this, he turns his entire book into a Marxist (Communist) attack on Porter’s “anti-totalitarian politics.” (*Katherine Anne Porter’s Artistic Development*, 1993: 191-92). Givner is especially angry at Porter because Givner supports the Communists, as is evident in her identification with Herbst, her belief that traitors should be employed in U.S. intelligence agencies, and her objections to Porter’s unflattering depiction of the corrupt Communist leader Braggioni in “Flowering Judas.”

Feminist critics derive status from publishing on Porter due to her high status. They celebrate her for being a star “woman writer” at the same time that they try to discredit her character and judgment because she does not agree with them. Givner sides with Herbst and the other most negative critics of Porter’s fiction, calling *Ship of Fools* “monotonal”—evidence of her own limitations. She claims to be uncovering “repressed motivations” but what she exposes is her incapacity for literary analysis. She lacks the skill to explain the ending of *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, for example, and resorts to offering half a dozen possible meanings including “necrophilia” as if one interpretation is as good as another. As if salvation of the soul is the same as a desire to have sex with corpses. She quotes Porter’s account of her “beatific vision” of Heaven yet does not see its significance. Givner claims that Porter “could not imagine characters with the capacity to develop, and she was never able to create them.” Much to the contrary, there are many—most obviously Miranda. The Miranda stories, including *Old Mortality* and *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, are all about her development from childhood to womanhood. All the critics discuss this. Clearly, Givner did not read them. They might differ from her point of view, hence they are a threat to her.

Givner also defames Porter by implying that her religious practice was just an act and that she lost her faith. Her own atheism is expressed when she says that Porter’s father “bluntly refuted the dogma of the virgin birth.” The word “refuted” implies that he *proved* that Christianity is based on a falsehood. Later in the biography, Givner implies that she has proven that Porter “wavered in her ability to believe in God,” though she has given no evidence of this: “Even when she wavered...” Just as Givner claimed to read Porter’s mind in accusing her of betraying Herbst to the F.B.I., she claims to read Porter’s mind in accusing her of losing her faith: “Perhaps the most accurate apprehension of her delicate balance between skepticism and faith was that sensitivity recorded by Flannery O’Connor half a century later: ‘When she asked me where we were going in Europe and I said Lourdes, a very strange expression came over her face, just a slight shock as if some sensitive spot had been touched.’” Givner falsifies by withholding what Porter said her expression meant: “She said that she had always wanted to go to Lourdes, perhaps she would get there some day and make a novena that she would finish her novel...” (Letters, *The Habit of Being*, 275) This expresses Porter’s *faith*, not “skepticism” about the existence of God.

Givner identifies Laura in “Flowering Judas” with Porter and refers to “her loss of the Catholic faith of her childhood.” Atheist critics often incorrectly equate Porter with a character who lacks religious faith as

evidence that she lacks faith herself, but Laura has not lost her faith. She prays and goes to Mass and at the end of the story she dreams in terror that she is going to Hell for betraying Jesus—as implied by the title of the story—as well as Eugenio. This nightmare is proof of her continuing religious faith. At the end of her discussion Givner diminishes Laura's faith even more by calling it “the lost religion of her childhood,” as if she outgrew it. If she had, she would not have had the nightmare.

In 1944 Porter rented a room from a Catholic family and Givner says that “Porter quickly returned to Catholicism.” And years later, “she turned once again to the Church.” Porter opposed some traditional attitudes and principles of the Catholic Church, especially from a feminist perspective, and she once got so insulted by a priest at confession that she felt alienated from the Church for years, but Givner offers no evidence that Porter ever doubted the existence of God. Even if you equate Porter with Miranda as rejecting her religious faith at the end of *Old Mortality*, she regains it in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*. Atheist critics such as Givner give the false impression that Porter's temporary alienation from the Catholic Church is the same as losing faith in God. Givner acknowledges that for the last ten years of her life Porter was a very active Catholic, loving to go to Mass and regularly going to confession.

Yet Givner argues that Porter still had a “terrible need” to believe: “She longed to believe in God and in life after death.” Givner mentions that Porter saw the ghost of her little dead brother when she was two years old and once felt the ghost of her little niece Mary Alice lay down beside her in bed, but Givner does not reveal that while being interviewed by Enrique Lopez for *Conversations with Katherine Anne Porter* (1981: 135-36, 139), Porter told him of being visited by an evil spirit. And that just then a good spirit came into the room: “It's Flannery O'Connor—she's come to visit. She must have known we were thinking about her.” Lopez adds, “Knowing that Miss O'Connor had died two or three years before, I simply sat there in dead silence...Miss Porter kept staring at the unseen presence for at least ten minutes, her hands loosely folded on her lap, an expression of calm inner happiness in her face.” Porter had already visited Heaven when she died in 1918. In “The Cracked Looking Glass” Porter's tone implies that she believes her woman protagonist has indeed seen ghosts all her life. Having seen ghosts and Heaven herself, how could Porter have any doubt about the reality of the afterlife?

Givner tries to destroy respect for Porter at the outset of her biography by accusing her of betraying Herbst and throughout her book she continues repeatedly to stab Porter in the back. At the end, she delivers a killing thrust. She admits that as Porter neared death she told Sister Maura, “Death is beautiful. I long to die. I love God. I know that he loves me.” And that when Father Roseliep assured her that eternity would be better than this world, she told him, “Oh yes, I know that.” And that her priest declared that “those five words expressed the Christian faith of Katherine Anne Porter as he had known it: ‘A faith as indestructible as the love.’ Yet *still*, Givner refuses to believe Porter or her priest: “Clearly she yearned deeply for the promise of life after death, but whether that yearning was ever transformed into true faith before she died, it is impossible to say.” How much evidence of faith does a biographer need? Givner claims to know the soul of Porter better than her priest does, but as an atheist she does not even believe in the soul. Givner never supports her point with any evidence at all, only “evidence” to the contrary. She claims it is impossible to say whether Porter's religious faith was true, but then she *does* say. She implies it was *not* true—that Porter was a liar and a hypocrite and a fake—by comparing her to a delusional old lady who loses her faith at the last moment: “She lay like Granny Weatherall...” The last word of her biography is “failed,” implying that Porter failed in character and that her religious faith is not true.

As her final cutting stroke, Givner tries to behead Porter's reputation by equating her to a debauched old atheist aristocrat who chases after men--dependent, alone and pathetic. This is the most insulting Givner contrives to be: “At the very end she lay, like La Condesa on the *Vera*, drugged and demented...defiant until the last moment when...the little point of light flickered and failed.” Once again Givner claims to read Porter's mind without even witnessing the event. How does she know that the light “flickered”? How could any dying person be “defiant” while drugged and demented? As Elizabeth Hardwick says, “The truth is that Katherine Anne Porter was drugged and demented from strokes and the ghastly illnesses of extreme old age. It is not a useful summarizing sentiment to think of her as a fiction, just as it has not been altogether wise to think of her fiction as her life...The biographer's rather smug provincialism distorts the worldly and amusing mishaps of a woman who was not made for marriage.” (*American Fictions* 305, 307) Jane DeMouy, who was holding Porter's hand when she died, did not see her as “defiant”: “Gradually, softly

finally, she lets the light die”; “There were times when she repeated that she wanted to die.” (“Elegy for Katherine Anne,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 75, 1999: 504-10).

Earlier in the biography Givner says that La Condesa was based on the journalist Jane Anderson, who had been a feminist role model for Porter in her youth, but who was eventually indicted for treason after broadcasting for the Nazis from Berlin. Givner takes revenge on Porter for the exposure of her friend Herbst as a traitor by repeatedly calling Porter anti-Semitic and identifying her through La Condesa with Anderson and treasonous Nazism. Givner belongs to the hit squad of radical Feminist critics who attack the classics and try to destroy the reputations of great writers who disagree with them. Her words accusing Porter of betraying Herbst apply not to the author but to herself: She “was motivated by cold-blooded malice and delighted by the thought of destroying her friend.”

Ship of Fools (1962)

The negative critics have been routed. Their ship has sunk. Over the years the accumulating analyses by many discerning critics have demonstrated that *Ship of Fools* is the last great masterpiece of Modernism—a landmark of literary history. One characteristic of a masterpiece is that it gets attacked for being original. Even *Moby-Dick* got mostly bad reviews. Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein hated *Ulysses* (1922), the most influential innovative fiction of the 20th century, and it got censored in the United States until 1933. Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Eliot’s “The Waste Land” (1922), another masterpiece that got some terrible reviews, are the greatest achievements that mark the beginning of literary Modernism in America. *Ship of Fools* (1962) marks the end of the Modernist movement.

Ulysses is famous for its many correspondences between an ancient text and the present. *Ship of Fools* likewise contains many correspondences between an ancient text and the present, while also containing many prefigurations of the Nazi regime—pointing both backward and forward in history. *Ship of Fools* also became a bestseller, popular for colorful descriptions, vivid dramatic scenes, and brilliant characterizations. There are also many similarities between Porter’s work and *The Magic Mountain* (1924) by the German Thomas Mann: Both are complex blends of Realism and Modernist symbolism, consistently ironic, with allegorical characters. Both works have been challenging to critics—over many of their heads in the case of Porter. Both use the metaphor of sickness, Mann to analyze the psychological sources of World War I in human nature and Porter to analyze the psychological sources of World War II.

One of only eleven American novels containing multiple coinciding allegories, *Ship of Fools* contains 3 coinciding allegories evoked by the metaphor of the ship: (1) the ship of the world; (2) the ship of state (the ship corresponds to the government of Germany in 1931 that soon got taken over by Captain Hitler); and (3) the ship of the individual soul in quest of salvation. Melville used this ship metaphor repeatedly in his fictions set at sea, but his *The Confidence-Man* (1852), set on a Mississippi River steamboat, is his novel most comparable to *Ship of Fools* in its pessimistic view of human nature—which is essentially the same as the Christian view: Humans are corrupted by selfishness, pride and other faults exposed in both novels. Liberals who do not believe they are ever wrong resent such affronts to their self-esteem.

Porter blends 6 traditional literary modes into an organic whole: (1) Allegory; (2) Realism; (3) Satire; (4) Confession; (5) Historical Novel; (6) Modernism. The most evident mode is Realism in the tradition of Henry James, deep and extensive psychological analysis of character, manners and morals. *Ship of Fools* is a model of Realism in its masterful dialogue, varieties of speech, accurate technical details, objectivity, and vision of life. The ironic tone has a sharp edge of Satire. The book is also a discreet religious Confession in the tradition of St. Augustine, as Porter purges her soul by projecting aspects of herself into at least one character—Mrs. Treadwell—bases other characters on former lovers and husbands, and declared “I am a passenger on that ship.” In its time, settings, themes, and correspondences between some characters and real people, this is also an Historical Novel. *Ship of Fools* is Modernist in its multiple points of view, interior monologues, analogies between the present and the past and future, correspondences to an ancient text, blending of diverse literary modes, cosmic vision, and varying of styles.

Discerning critics of the novel have compared Porter to Juvenal, Horace, Sebastian Brant, Dante, Swift, Sterne, Balzac, Dickens, George Eliot, Melville, Flaubert, T. S. Eliot, Joyce, Mann, Kafka, Faulkner,

Camus, and to the artists Hieronymus Bosch, Albrecht Durer, Frans Hals, and Goya. All critics, even her detractors, allow that Porter is one of the greatest short story writers of the 20th century. Nevertheless, it became a commonplace among her detractors that the quality of her writing declined in her attempt at a long novel. On the contrary, in his analysis of style in *Ship of Fools*, Robert Heilman praises Porter for her “great range” and her “superiority in achievement.” She has an “accurately analytical style that is the agent of a mature psychic and moral understanding.” He praises Porter’s diversity, virtuosity, elegance, clarity, precision, strength, grace, perceptiveness, vividness, detailed visualization, penetration, symbolism, inclusive sweep, and skill in compositional patterns. “Here is a writer...composing out of her own genius, and yet in her use of language exhibiting admirable qualities that seem akin to those of distinguished predecessors” Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Tobias Smollett, and Joseph Conrad. Any reader sensitive to language should be able to enjoy *Ship of Fools* for the quality of the writing alone.

The word *purgatory* in the first sentence of the novel and the epigraph from St. Paul before the last section establish a Christian perspective ignored by Postmodernist critics, whose analyses are atheistic. The conscience is represented best in the novel by Dr. Schumann and Herr Glocken the hunchback. The doctor is a Catholic who calls the evil twins Ric and Rac demons possessed by the Devil—evoking the religious allegory of salvation. At the opposite end of the religious spectrum from the wild Ric and Rac are the two complacent priests who are “much alike” and personify the current ineffectuality of the Church in the world. Nobody can stop Ric and Rac just as nobody can stop Hitler. The priests do not even try.

There are 5 major events in the novel: (1) the boarding of the ship by suffering workers; (2) the dismissal of Freytag from the Captain’s table because he has a Jewish wife; (3) the woodcarver’s sacrifice of his life to save a dog, evoking Christ; (4) the looting of shops by the Spanish dancers that is ignored though observed by many; (5) the takeover of the ship by the dancers. These events are moral tests that are all failed by nearly all the characters and by all the negative critics of *Ship of Fools*. Responses to each event express the souls of the responders. The negative critics also miss or grotesquely falsify the significance of the dying old Herr Graf, the most Christlike character, representing true religious faith. The critic Darlene Unrue calls him a “sexually repressed sadist and religious fanatic”! She is more wrong about him than any fool on the ship. The name of God occurs 176 times in the novel, twice in the final sentence. The recurrent expressions “God knows,” “for God’s sake,” and “God help us” are religious motifs throughout. Most of the characters are headed from purgatory to hell on earth and Hell hereafter.

Critics who claimed there is “no plot” in *Ship of Fools* are less perceptive than most passengers on the ship, who at least detect the plot of the Spanish dancers. These critics miss both that plot and one of the most momentous plots in history: The takeover of the German ship by the Spanish dancers is analogous to the impending takeover of Germany by the Nazis, who are plotting to take over the world. A literary plot is a narrative that dramatizes causes and effects. *Ship of Fools* dramatizes the psychological and social causes of World War II and dramatizes the effects through analogy and prefigurations such as when Rieber declares of the poor steerage passengers, “I would put them all in a big oven and turn on the gas.” The Spanish dancers propose a pact between Spain and Germany to the Captain, which evokes the pact between the fascist Franco and Adolph Hitler during the Spanish Civil War that began soon after the action of this novel. To evoke massive historical plots that were soon to overwhelm individual lives, Porter abandons the convention of a single protagonist so as not to exaggerate the importance of any one individual, and she frequently ends scenes with ironic emphasis on the mundane and petty. There are over a dozen individual plots involving diverse relationships and encounters among the passengers that generate suspense, most significantly those of David and Jenny and of Dr. Schumann and La Condesa.

Literary history contributed to making the negative critics of *Ship of Fools* look foolish. They postured as defenders of the highest literary standards, yet they belittled a masterpiece at the very time these standards were collapsing. By 1962 Postmodernism was replacing Modernism, as marked in 1963 by the publication of *V.*, the first novel of Thomas Pynchon—the most hip, popular, celebrated, elite, awarded and representative Postmodernist fiction writer in America. Porter the Christian got criticized for pessimism about human nature, whereas Pynchon the atheist cynic is pessimistic about everything. Blind critics saw no “soul of humanity” in *Ship of Fools*, whereas Pynchon does not even believe in the soul. Complaints were made about Porter’s characterization—which is brilliant—whereas there is no characterization at all in Pynchon. All his characters are cartoon projections of his ideas. Complaints were made by inattentive

critics that there is no dramatic tension in *Ship of Fools*, whereas in Pynchon there can be no dramatic tension because he writes intellectual fantasies without any real people in them. Complaints were made that Porter's realistic ending lacks force—missing the psychological forces of fascism evoked throughout the book and the implicit presence of no less a force than Adolph Hitler—whereas Pynchon delights in trivial open endings deprived of any force at all by ambiguity.

The dunce cap awarded to the Most Foolish Critic goes to Theodore Solotaroff for attacking *Ship of Fools* as if the author had once humiliated him by rejecting his advances. Such critics are like the most immoral passengers in their (1) prejudice and injustice, as by lumping all the characters together with negative generalizations as the Nazis do to the Jews; (2) dismissing the problems of others as tedious and “dull”; (3) disregarding the significance of the woodcarver—a Christ-evoking figure—and his sacrifice of his life; (4) overlooking the dying old faith healer as the Christlike personification of dying religious faith in the 20th century. Secular critics are too prejudiced against religious content to see it.

The most ridiculous allegation by fools was that *Ship of Fools* is too negative and hopeless. These critics had no historical awareness. Everyone else knew that World War II was *very* negative, but that civilization was in fact saved in the end. Porter perfectly evokes the causes of the war and her novel derives great power from history—from the collective knowledge of what happened next in Germany and in Spain. Most of the negative critics are liberals who would prefer hopeful sentimentality to the truth. They would have improved the ending of the film adaptation of *The Diary of Anne Frank* by showing happy Nazi children pausing at play, waving goodbye to Anne as she is driven off to a gas chamber.

SUCCESS

“Until *Ship of Fools* I couldn't see any future for me except sleeping under bridges”; “I think I've spent about ten percent of my energies on writing. The other ninety percent went to keeping my head above water”; “Late in my life, by total hazard, by no design of my own whatever, I wrote a novel that became a modest bestseller.” Through heroic effort Porter finally attained the common American dream of almost every serious fiction writer: To achieve the highest literary stature and to make a lot of money. “There has never been a living in art,” she said, “except by a fluke of fortune.”

After *Ship of Fools* became a bestseller she sold the movie rights for half a million dollars. Some of her stories were dramatized on the radio and throughout the 1950s and 60s she continued to appear frequently on radio and television, including the BBC in London. “When I hit a million-dollar jackpot, as I have: the kind of people who hate my writing, and my reputation, are joined by the people who hate my having all that money.” Porter received countless major fellowships, tributes, awards, medals, citations, and honorary degrees. She spoke or taught at over 200 colleges, universities, and art centers. “People get the idea I sat there milidewing over a desk writing *Ship of Fools* for 20 years. They don't seem to realize that at that time I brought out three other books and I spent most of my time traipsing around the country speaking”; “I say the most incendiary things, and everybody applauds.”

She received letters and telegrams from all over the world and an average of 50 requests for book jacket blurbs every year. She got so besieged by journalists—“hyena newspaper columnists” and “coyote camera men”—that she protested: “Have you ever tried ignoring a wasp in your car when you are driving, or a bee tangled in your hair?” In 1962 she was short-listed for a Nobel Prize. She donated her papers to the University of Maryland, available to researchers in The Katherine Anne Porter Room. Porter reached such a pinnacle of acclaim that President John F. Kennedy recommended *Ship of Fools* to guests and during his administration President Lyndon Johnson invited her to dinner frequently at the White House. In 1966 her *Collected Stories* was awarded both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize.

ALTRUISM

As a child Porter played Joan of Arc getting burned at the stake. She followed her grandmother in marching out of a revival meeting to protest discrimination against Mexicans. When her sister Gay was abandoned by her husband and fell ill with two small children, Porter cared for them all and worked to earn money for their support. While hospitalized with tuberculosis she got out of bed and organized a school for

dying children. She became publicity chairman for the local Red Cross, did volunteer social work and helped organize a tuberculosis sanatorium in Fort Worth. She risked her life by joining the revolution in Mexico to help the poor.

She protested for most of her life against the unfair trial and eventual execution (1927) of Sacco and Vanzetti for murder, due to prejudice against them as anarchists and foreigners, and she even published a book about it, *The Never-Ending Wrong* (1977). "In those days I was sometimes willing to march with the devil himself if the specific cause was a just and decent one." She went through a trauma in Mexico trying unsuccessfully to keep the homosexual poet Hart Crane from committing suicide. She resigned from the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1943 to protest the practice of identifying some candidates as "Negro," prompting the organization to stop the practice. "I was horrified at the Negro people in this country having to riot to gain something they should have had all along." She said of race relations, "God does not know whether a skin is black or white. He sees only souls."

Porter was a creative writing teacher who encouraged and mentored many students and young writers. Repeatedly in interviews and essays she commended and called attention to beginning fiction writers she liked. She gave advice in generous letters. She also became friends with many established and prominent writers including Caroline Gordon, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Andrew Lytle, and Glenway Wescott. She loved Flannery O'Connor and wrote a moving tribute to her: "I loved and valued her dearly, her work and her strange unworldly radiance of spirit in a human being so intelligent and undeceived by the appearance of things." Porter promoted Eudora Welty as a protégé, writing the introduction to *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories* (1941).

It should be added that Porter had the highest aesthetic and moral standards in evaluating fiction and did not soften her negative criticism of many prominent writers including her close friend Warren for *All the King's Men* in 1948. *The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings of Katherine Anne Porter* (1970) includes literary criticism and commentary on Thomas Hardy, Mark Twain, Willa Cather, Katherine Mansfield, D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Ford Madox Ford, E. M. Forster, Gertrude Stein, T. S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, W. B. Yeats, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, Caroline Gordon, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Glenway Wescott, James Purdy, J. F. Powers, Andrew Lytle, James Agee, Richard Hughes, and Dylan Thomas. "The real masters of fiction were Ernest Hemingway, Joseph Conrad, Eudora Welty, and James Joyce."

In 1948 Porter joined Hemingway and Frost and other writers in petitioning successfully to get old Ezra Pound released from St. Elizabeth's mental hospital. That year also she met Wallace Stegner, the major Realist of the 20th century, who successfully combined fiction writing with teaching at Stanford. She was persuaded by his example to try university teaching on a part-time basis. Stegner had the greatest respect for Porter and arranged for her to teach at Stanford during 1948-49, even though the university was in financial straits and had refused to allow the Department to fill three openings for regular faculty. He persuaded his colleagues to take the money for her salary from contingency funds and to make her classes noncredit. That way she would be free from the chore of examinations and grading papers. This was a writer's dream. Almost no work meant lots of time to write.

However, Porter was insecure about her lack of academic degrees and felt that making her courses noncredit was both a vote of no confidence in her and unfair to students. She set out to prove herself. Stegner suggested that she limit her class enrollment to ten students, but she admitted everyone. As Stegner had predicted, her course was the most popular on campus. Students sat crowded on the floor, window ledges, and radiators, with standing room only. Porter had volunteered to read papers for over 60 students. She was hounded by them asking for letters and advice. Some harassed her at home, knocking on her windows. In 1953 her money ran out again and she accepted another university teaching position, this time at the University of Michigan. Once again she insisted that her courses be offered for credit, though it greatly increased her workload and reduced time and energy for writing. During a class lecture in 1954 she collapsed at the podium with a heart attack.

FRAILITY

Porter was tough yet frail. After she died of influenza in 1918 and came back to life, the first time she tried to sit up, she fell over and broke an arm. Afterward in New York a drunken editor fractured her rib trying to kiss her. She fell seriously ill with the flu virtually every year, was usually confined to her bed each time for two weeks and often had to be hospitalized. Frequently the flu was accompanied by a return of tuberculosis. She was given the last rites of the Catholic Church numerous times. She also had a serious gastric disorder that flared up about twice a year. In 1929 at a literary party in Connecticut she was sexually assaulted, probably raped, and was hospitalized with broken ribs. Porter was sensitive, nervous, easily upset, soon fatigued, and would sometimes run a high fever for no reason. She was a bountiful hostess, fine seamstress and excellent cook, but she had difficulty with some practical matters. She could drive a car only when no vehicle was approaching from the opposite direction.

A chain smoker, she had a chronic cough. In the course of her life she also had phlebitis, gout, mumps, gall bladder problems, pneumonia several times, and angina pectoris. Once she had to be hospitalized after she accidentally overdosed on sleeping pills and another time she was hospitalized after mixing alcohol with sleeping pills. At age 70, after drinking she fell down and cut her head open and required stitches. Two years later she fell down a long flight of stairs and broke 6 ribs. In 1968 she tripped over her kittens and fell down a long flight of stairs and was rushed to a hospital with injuries to her head, vertebrae, ribs, spine, and right arm. Two years later she fell and broke her hip.

Then she began to have severe impairing strokes. She forgot a lot. Once she woke up at night and could not remember her name and tried to look herself up in the telephone book. In 1974 she bought a plain wooden coffin like those common in Mexico. People took advantage of her vulnerability and generous heart. Fans and strangers visited her in her high rise apartment in College Park, Maryland and she gave them gifts. They could see that she was disabled, yet they took away valuable books, pictures, furniture and mementos that had been willed to others or that could have been sold for her support. By then her only regular income was a monthly social security check and a monthly check from her publisher for deferred royalties on *Ship of Fools*. By 1977 she had brain damage, difficulty speaking, a paralyzed right arm, limited vision and speech, glaucoma, emphysema, and aphasia. The court appointed her loyal nephew Paul Porter to become her guardian.

DEATH

Many friends and admirers visited her as her health declined. All her life people had been attracted to Katherine Anne Porter, many for selfish reasons. But many displayed true devotion, giving her money, finding her a place to live, running errands for her, rescuing her when she fell sick, nursing her, getting her to the hospital in emergencies, paying bills and even for vacations to Bermuda and elsewhere--protecting her. It was not primarily because she was a great writer, it was because they loved her. Yet she always felt essentially alone: "There is no one I would call for in the hour of my death, and that I think is the final test of whether you are really alone or not." This was the price she paid in becoming one of the greatest American writers: "The only thing that counts is my work." At the age of 90, Porter died peacefully at her last home, a nursing facility in Silver Spring, Maryland: "There's such a thing as staying on after the party's over." Her ashes were buried at Indian Creek Cemetery near her first home, beside her mother. On her tombstone is a declaration of her faith: "IN MY END IS MY BEGINNING."

Michael Hollister (2018)

