

REBUTTAL TO CRITICISM

Ship of Fools (1962)

Katherine Anne Porter

(1890-1980)

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 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.

Michael Hollister (2017)