

## ANALYSIS

### THE STYLE OF KATHERINE ANNE PORTER

(1890-1980)

“I spend my life thinking about technique, method, style...The only time I do not think of them at all is when I am writing.”

Porter  
quoted by Glenway Wescott  
*Images of Truth: Remembrances and Criticism*  
(Hamish Hamilton, London 1963) 28

“Her style is beyond doubt the most economical and at the same time the richest in American fiction.... Her great distinction as a prose stylist has been known only to a few readers....She neither overworks a brilliant style capable of every virtuosity nor forces the background of her material into those sensational effects that are the besetting sin of American prose fiction...There is much sensuous detail, but no decoration. For Miss Porter has a direct and powerful grasp of her material as a whole; this makes every sentence, whether of description, narration, or dialogue, create not only an inevitable and beautiful local effect, but contribute directly to the final tone and climax of the story...While the quality of the style is the same in all of them—there is always the same freshness of imagery, the same rich personal idiom—the method is always different. And—this is her great distinction—the method is always completely objective.”

Allen Tate  
“A New Star”  
*Nation* 131 (1 October 1930) 352-53

“Miss Porter is twice brilliantly successful, though brilliant is a misleading word to use for the magnificent deep sobriety of her style. These seem to me the best short stories that have come out of America since the early Hemingways, and there is more promise of future life in them, the sense of a consciousness open to any wind, a style adaptable to any subject.”

Graham Greene  
“Legend”  
*London Spectator* 156 (24 April 1936) 766

“The method itself is an index to the characteristics of Miss Porter’s fiction—the rich surface detail scattered with apparently casual profuseness and the close structure which makes such detail meaningful; the great compression and economy which one discovers upon analysis; the precision of psychology and observation, the texture of the style. Most reviewers commenting upon Miss Porter’s special distinction, refer to her ‘style’—struck, no doubt, by an exceptional felicity of phrase, a precision in the use of metaphor and simile, and a rhythmical subtlety. But, no doubt, such comments, in the reviews, have chilled the heart of the potential reader, who—and I believe quite rightly—does not want to be lulled or titillated exquisitely by ‘beautiful style.’ He is put off by the reviewer’s easy abstracting of style for comment and praise; his innocence repudiates the fallacy of ‘agreeable style.’ Style does not come to his attention as style.”

Robert Penn Warren  
“Katherine Anne Porter (Irony with a Center)”  
*Kenyon Review* 4 (Winter 1942) 29-42

“One must respect the sheer virtuosity of Miss Porter’s prose, which is supple and ever so carefully selected.”

Edward Weeks  
*Atlantic Monthly* CLXXIV  
(November 1944) 131

“It has for a long time been apparent that Katherine Anne Porter consistently writes a luminous prose, of an exactness of choice and suggestiveness of phrasing, which is altogether extraordinary. Miss Porter’s work has probably been subjected to the kind of scrutiny that most writers hardly dare to hope for, rarely achieve, and can almost never withstand. That Miss Porter can bear such careful reading proves her much more than simply an excellent stylist....She holds so fast to reality there is so much heart in her accuracy, that the stories spread out beyond the bare meanings of the words and the incidents related, to become authoritative and substantial images of an entire society.”

Gertrude Buckman  
“Miss Porter’s New Stories”  
*Partisan Review* 12 (Winter 1945) 134

“Miss Porter writes English of a purity and precision almost unique in contemporary American fiction... She is absolutely a first-rate artist, and what she wants other people to know she imparts to them by creating an object, the self-developing organism of a work of prose.”

Edmund Wilson  
“Katherine Anne Porter”  
*Classics and Commercials* (Farrar, Straus 1950) 219-23

“Miss Porter’s fiction has been praised for various reasons, but mainly for its high level of technical accomplishment in matters of style, form, precision, and so on. Too often, reviewers and serious critics alike have stressed these qualities in her writing at the expense of its substance, and the extraordinary unity of meaning and feeling in her prose has been almost ignored. Style and form, in Miss Porter’s fiction, represent the most direct means to a given end: rendering a particular facet of human life in an attempt to arrive at its significance. Miss Porter does not, so far as I can see, experiment with forms or techniques, and her style in one story is a good deal like her style in another, though, of course, its tone may and frequently does change. But she represents...the kind of writer who has something to say rather than the writer who consciously strives for perfection of style or form. The clarity of her style and the precision of her language add greatly to the power of what she has to say, of course, but it is the meaning of human experience as she visualizes it which is of most significance.”

Harry John Mooney, Jr.  
*The Fiction and Criticism of Katherine Anne Porter*  
(U Pittsburgh 1957) 1

“Her style, unmannered as it is, is intensely personal, entirely an intimate thing. Irony, scrupulous objectivity, precision and subtlety of form—by these means, she fashions her mastery over the personal element and gives significance to action.”

Edward G. Schwartz  
“The Fictions of Memory”  
*Southwest Review* (Summer 1960)

“All of her fiction published so far has been perfect....Her prose has been called ‘beautifully molded,’ ‘carefully wrought,’ ‘brilliant,’ and a masterpiece of ‘polish and lucidity....Before the phenomenon of her work, critics usually throw reserve aside and join the chorus of praise....That her reputation remains at a peak cannot be doubted.”

James William Johnson  
“Another Look at Katherine Anne Porter”  
*Virginia Quarterly Review* (Autumn 1960)

“In the perfection of its sinister mood and in its economy of detail, in its unrelieved grimness, this story [*Noon Wine*] is the equal of *Ethan Frome* [Wharton].”

Louis Auchincloss  
*Pioneers & Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Women Novelists*  
(U Minnesota 1961) 142

“Miss Porter’s style is elegant and precise; it is straight without being thin, rich without the slightest trace of cloying. It is neither colloquial nor baroque, and she never permits herself a mannerism or an

idiosyncrasy. In fact, it is a very fine style, put to use with the greatest skill, but this style and her words have a way of vanishing from consciousness and the page while flesh and blood take over.”

Sybille Bedford  
“Voyage to Everywhere”  
*Spectator* 209 (London)  
(16 November 1962) 763-64

“No one since Stendhal has written so plainly, so glass-clearly; and my author carries about three times as much evidence of the senses as [Stendhal] ever did.”

Glenway Wescott  
*Images of Truth: Remembrances and Criticism*  
(Hamish Hamilton, London 1963) 56

“A prose style of strength, clarity, and a range which extends from primitive simplicity to poetic beauty. It led to the creation of a small but relatively perfect body of short stories and novelettes characterized by concentration, intensity, suggestiveness, and extreme power.”

William L. Nance  
*Katherine Anne Porter & the Art of Rejection*  
(U North Carolina 1963) 249

“Her prose is severe and exact; her ironies are subtle but hard....Her power to make a landscape, a room, a group of people, thinkingly alive is not the vague, brutal talent of the post-Hemingway reporter but belongs to the explicit Jamesian period and suggests the whole rather than the surface of a life....It is true that she is chastely on the edge of her subjects, that one catches the wild look of the runaway in her eye; but if her manner is astringent it is not precious. She is an important writer in the genre because she solves the essential problem: how to satisfy exhaustively in writing briefly.”

V. S. Pritchett  
*The Collected Short Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*  
*New Statesman* (10 January 1964) 41-43

“Extraordinarily well-formed, often brilliantly written, they are firmly grounded in life; and the accuracy and precision of their surfaces, so disarmingly easy to read, hold in tension the confused human tangles below....Two special gifts are evident: depth of characterization...and a style that encompasses the symbolic without sacrificing naturalness....In the best of her work, the factual and the lyrical are kept in perfect balance.”

Howard Moss  
“A Poet of the Story”  
*The New York Times Book Review* (12 September 1965) 1, 26

“In a style as invisible as the rhythm of a voice, and as much her own as her own voice, she tells her stories of horror and humiliation and in the doing fills her readers with a rising joy. The exemplary prose that is without waste or extravagance or self-indulgence or display, without any claim for its triumph, is full of pride. And her reader shares in that pride, as well he might: it is pride in the language, pride in using the language to search out human meanings, pride in the making of a good piece of work. A personal spell is about the stories, the something of her own that we refer to most often, perhaps, when we mention its beauty.”

Eudora Welty  
“The Eye of the Story”  
*Yale Review* (Winter 1966)

“Miss Porter writes English of a purity and precision almost unique in contemporary fiction. She is recognized as a creative artist of almost awesome fastidiousness, whose very paucity of production has come to be regarded as the mark of a talent so fine that it can scarcely bring itself to function. Her stories are considered to be distinguished examples of their type and have undoubtedly had enormous influence on the contemporary development of the form....She has written many flawlessly executed stories...Miss

Porter is known chiefly for her stories of delicate and...subtle psychological complication, in which everything is tightly packed in the manner of a symbolist poem.”

John W. Aldridge  
“Art and Passion in Katherine Anne Porter”  
*Time to Murder and Create: The Contemporary Novel in Crisis*  
(David McKay 1966)

“Miss Porter deserves a place in the highest rank....She has been able with uncanny skill to select details from the past and invest them with beauty, immediacy, and significance. In this talent she has few peers....The sisters to whom her education was entrusted must have labored better than either she or they knew, for she shows the restraint and order of style that a classical education and an authoritarian regimen are capable of giving. Moreover, though the effect of her religious training in the Catholic Church is rarely obtrusive in her writing, it is everywhere a felt presence.”

Lodwick Hartley and George Core, eds.  
Introduction  
*Katherine Anne Porter: A Critical Symposium*  
(U Georgia 1969) xv, xvi, xxii

“Katherine Anne Porter is sometimes thought of as a stylist....There is nothing of arresting façade in her style, nothing of showmanship....Though it looks easy rather than hard, it has a certain elusiveness that makes it not quite easy to account for. It would be difficult to imitate or parody....Miss Porter has a very wide vocabulary, but no pet vocabulary; she has considerable skill in compositional patterns....She is exact and explicit; she eschews mystery in the medium without losing the mystery in the matter....Her variety appears in an obviously wide spectrum of tones and attitudes....modulating easily among the contemptible, the laughable, the pitiable, the evasive laudable, and, most of all, the ever-present contradictory....

In *Ship of Fools* the style is a window of things and people...It seems compelled by the objects in the fiction; it is their visible surface, the necessary verbal form that makes their identity perceptible. It seems never the construction of an artist imposing...but rather an emanation of the materials themselves...Miss Porter is ruling all, of course, but she seems not to be ruling at all: hence of her style we use such terms as ‘distance,’ ‘elegance,’ and of course the very word for what she seems to have ceded, ‘control.’ She is an absentee presence: in one sense her style is no-style. No-style is what it will seem if style means some notable habit of rhythm or vocabulary, some interchangeable...advice that firmly announces ‘Faulkner’ or ‘Hemingway.’ Miss Porter has no ‘signal’ or call letters that identify a single station or wave length. She does not introduce herself or present herself. Much less does she gesticulate....

No-style means a general style...a fusion of proven styles. She can do ordinary documentary...She relies without embarrassment on the plain, direct, ordinary, explicit....Yet she has no fear of the adjectives somewhat in disrepute now....Without altering the everyday, matter-of-fact manner, she gets below the surface....The commonplace comparison...unobtrusively deflates the large official figure:...Captain Thiele paces the deck ‘alone,’ returning the respectful salutations of the passengers with reluctant little jerks of his head, upon which sat a monumental ornate cap, white as plaster’...The easy lucidity never shirks depths or darks...Under the gentle irony and the rhythm that serves it, lie in easy and well articulated orders a remarkable number of modifiers...She manages with equal skill the erection of ordinary terms, both concrete and analytical, into a periodic structure in which all elements converge unspectacularly on a climax of sudden insight....A compact sketch of outer world and inner meaning, it is never crowded or awkward or rambling....

Miss Porter can combine words unexpectedly without becoming ostentatious: for instance, an adjective denoting mood or value with a neutral noun—‘serious, well-shaped head,’ ‘weak dark whiskers,’ or, more urgently, ‘strong white rage of vengeful sunlight’; or sex words with gastric facts—‘They fell upon their splendid full-bodied German food with hot appetites.’ She pairs partly clashing words: ‘softened and dispirited’ (of a woman affected by childbirth), ‘with patience and a touch of severity’ (of people waiting for the boat to leave), ‘oafish and devilish at once’ (of a nagging inner voice), ‘at once crazed and stupefied’ (of the air of a bad eating place): and gets inner contradictions in sharp phrases: ‘this pugnacious assertion of high breeding,’ ‘classic erotic-frowning smile’ (of a dancer), ‘shameless pathos’ (of an angry

face). She can surprise, and convince, with a preposition: a newly married couple's 'first lessons in each other.'

She has strong, accurate, but not conspicuous metaphors: 'soggy little waiter,' 'pink-iced tea-cake of sympathy,' 'hand-decorated hates,' 'making conversation to scatter silence,' a 'laugh was a long cascade of falling tinware.' But metaphors are less numerous than similes, that now less fashionable figure to which Miss Porter turns with instinctive ease, rarely without amplifying the sense or shading of the tone, and always with the added thrust of imagistic vitality. She may fix the object visually: Elsa Lutz had a 'crease of fat like a goiter at the base of the throat'; on her canvases Jenny Brown painted cubistic designs 'in primary colors like fractured rainbows.' She has a sense of how the inanimate may creep up on or take over the human: the steerage passengers 'slept piled upon each other like dirty rags thrown out on a garbage heap'; or how a human attribute may be dehumanized: the Spanish dancers' voices 'crashed like breaking crockery.' When a woman, confident of her worldly knowingness, is publicly snubbed by the Captain, she first turns red; then her blush 'vanished and left her pale as unborn veal'—colorless, unknowing, pre-innocent, pre-calf. When his wife bursts forth with a public expression of views contrary to his own, Professor Hutten 'sat like something molded in sand, his expression that of a strong innocent man gazing into a pit of cobras.' It is a complete picture of mood and man.

Miss Porter confers her own incisive perception of character upon Jenny Brown when she has Jenny thinking about David Scott, '...I'll be carrying David like a petrified fetus for the rest of my life.' Jenny's sense of rigidity and immaturity in her lover is really an echo of her creator's sense of many of her human subjects: she sees them with easy clarity and goes right to the point. Her images for them come solidly out of life; they are not stylistic gestures...The difficulty of describing a style without mannerisms, crotchets, or even characteristic brilliances or unique excellences leads one constantly to use such terms as *plain, direct, ordinary, unpretentious, lucid, candid*...The qualities that they name are not inimical to the subtle or the profound, to the penetrating glance or the inclusive sweep.

Whether Miss Porter's basic words are a multitude of documentary nouns or adjectives, are literally descriptive or pointedly or amplifyingly imagistic, are terms that report or present or comment or analyze, she composes them, without evident struggle, in a great variety of ways—in combinations of revelatory unexpectedness; tersely or compactly or with unencumbered elaboration, either in a succession of ordered dependencies or in structured periods where everything builds to a final emphasis; with an apparently automatic interplay of force and fluency; meticulously but not pickily or gracelessly; with a kind of graceful adjustment to situation that we call urbanity, yet by no means an urbanity that implies charm or agreeableness at the expense of firmness or conviction.

Certain of Miss Porter's arrangements disclose characteristic ways of perceiving and shaping her materials. She describes Veracruz as a 'typical port town, cynical by nature, shameless by experience, hardened to showing its seamiest side to strangers: ten to one this stranger passing through is a sheep bleating for their shears, and one in ten is a scoundrel it would be a pity not to outwit.' The traditional rhetoric—the triad series; the first half balanced against the second, which is balanced internally; the antithesis and chiasmus—is the instrument of clarity, analytical orderliness, and detachment. Miss Porter has a notable talent for the succinct summarizing sequence; she often employs the series, which combines specification with dispatch; through it a packing together of near synonyms may master by saturation, or a quick-fingered catalogue may grasp a rush of simultaneous or consecutive events. A dancer's 'pantomime at high speed' to an infatuated pursuer communicates 'pity for him or perhaps his stupidity, contempt for the Lutzes, warning, insult, false commiseration, and finally, just plain ridicule.'

A series may define by a concise anatomy: William Denny's 'mind seemed to run monotonously on women, or rather, sex; money, or rather his determination not to be gypped by anybody; and his health.' Such a series remind one of Jane Austen, who can often look at people and things as logically placeable, sometimes dismissible by a quick list of traits, or naturally amenable to a 1-2-3 kind of classification. Miss Porter has a marked Jane Austen side, which appears, for instance, in the dry summation of a girl and her parents: their 'three faces were calm, grave, and much alike,' with the anticlimax offhand instead of sharpened up into a shattering deflation. Miss Porter's comic sense is like Austen's both in the use of pithy geometrical arrangements and in the presentation of observed ironies, sometimes suffusing a whole scene,

sometimes clipped down as in Neoclassical verse: Elsa Lutz spoke 'with a surprising lapse into everyday common sense' (cf. 'But Shadwell seldom deviates into sense'); Herr Lowenthal felt 'he was living in a world so dangerous he wondered how he dared go to sleep at night. But he was sleepy at that very moment.' (cf. 'And sleepless lovers, just at twelve, awake.') The irony is Austen-like when, though piercing, it is less censorious than tolerantly amused: 'With relief he seized upon this common sympathy between them, and they spent a profitable few minutes putting the Catholic Church in its place.'...

Yet to a passage with a strong Austen cast Miss Porter may make an inconspicuous addition that will elusively but substantially alter it. When Lizzi Spockenkieker runs carelessly into pompous Captain Thiele, he 'threw an arm about her stiffly,' and she, blushing, whinnying, cackling, scrambling, embraced him about the neck wildly as if she were drowning.' There is the Austen series crisply hitting off the ludicrous behavior, but there is more visual imagery than Austen uses, more of the physically excessive, and 'whinnying' and 'cackling,' dehumanizing words, carry the joke beyond the usual limit of the Austen mode. It is more like Charlotte Bronte, who could often plunge into the comic, but was likely to do it more fiercely and scornfully. With Bronte, the absurd more quickly edged into the grotesque and even the sinister; she had an awareness of potential damage not easily contained within a pure comic convention. Miss Porter is much closer to Bronte than to Austen in her description of Dr. Schumann when he catches the evil Spanish twins in another destructive practical joke: he 'examined the depths of their eyes for a moment with dismay at their blind, unwinking malignance, their cold slyness—not beasts, though, but human souls'....

Or consider this comment on a group of first-class passengers looking down on a steerage meal and feeling that the poor people there were being treated decently: 'Murmuring among themselves like pigeons...[they] seemed to be vaguely agreed that to mistreat the poor is not right, and they would be the first to say so, at any time. Therefore they were happy to be spared this unpleasant duty, to have their anxieties allayed, their charitable feelings soothed.' With the subdued ironic contemplation of the group, and with the series that dexterously encompasses their mood, this could be Austen's; and yet behind the smile-provoking self-deceit there is a kind of moral frailty, a trouble-breeding irresponsibility, and in the steerage sights a degree of wretchedness, that extends beyond the borders of the comic perspective. Here, as elsewhere, Miss Porter's manner is reminiscent of George Eliot's—of a carefully, accurately analytical style that is the agent of a mature psychic and moral understanding.... There is an Eliot-like perceptiveness in Freytag's discovery 'about most persons—that their abstractions and generalizations, their Rage of Justice or Hatred of Tyranny or whatever, too often disguised a bitter personal grudge of some sort far removed from the topic apparently under discussion' and in the matter-of-fact postscript that Freytag applied this only to others, never to himself....

The language and syntax reveal Miss Porter's eye for precision, specification, and distinctions. There is the same precision in the definition of Freytag's 'hardened expression of self-absorbed, accusing, utter righteousness' and of a stewardess's 'unpleasant mixture of furtive insolence and false abasement, the all too familiar look of resentful servility.'... It is near the end of the book that Jenny, the most sentient and spontaneous character, reflects upon her griefs over love that did not fulfill expectations: "--and what had it been but the childish refusal to admit and accept on some term or other the difference between what one hoped was true and what one discovers to be the mere laws of the human condition?" The clarity in words comes here from the character's clarity of thought, and this in turn from the writer's clarity of mind. Thus an examination of style in the narrower sense of verbal deportment leads, as it repeatedly does, to the style in conceiving—of the 'styling' of, we might say—episode and character, and from this on to the ultimate style of creative mind: the grasp of fact and the moral sense.

We have been following Miss Porter's range: from wit to wisdom, from the sense of the laughable slip or flaw to the awareness of graver self-deception and self-seeking, and to the feeling for reality that at once cuts through illusion and accepts, among the inevitable facts of life, the emotional pressures that lead to, and entangle, fulfillment and discord. Now beside this central sober work of reflective intelligence and alert conscience put the...play of the Captain's being driven, by a 'lethal cloud of synthetic rose scent' at dinner, to sneeze: 'He sneezed three times inwardly, one forefinger pressed firmly to his upper lip as he had been taught to do in childhood, to avoid sneezing in church. Silently he was convulsed with internal explosions, feeling as if his eyeballs would fly out, or his eardrums burst. At last he gave up and felt for his

handkerchief, sat up stiffly, head averted from the room, and sneezed steadily in luxurious agony a dozen times with muted sounds and streaming eyes, until the miasma was sneezed out and he was rewarded with a good nose-blow.'

This is farce, the comedy of the physical in which mind and feelings are engaged either not at all, or only mechanically: of the perversity of things and circumstances that render one absurd or grotesque with merely formal suffering, not the authentic kind that by stirring sympathy cuts off outrageous laughter. To say that it is in the vein of Smollett is to emphasize both its present rareness outside the work of committed funny-men and extraordinariness of having it juxtaposed with writing of sensitiveness and thoughtfulness.... Farce may have a satirical note, as in this note on Lizzi Spockenkieker's disappointment with Herr Rieber, her would-be lover: 'Every other man she had known had unfailingly pronounced the magic word *marriage* before ever he got into bed with her, no matter what came of it in fact.' A little earlier, Herr Rieber, a short fat man, having gone through suitable amatory preliminaries, decided that his hour had come and, 'with the silent intentness of a man bent on crime,' maneuvered Lizzi, a tall thin woman, 'to the dark side of the ship's funnel. He gave his prey no warning....It was like embracing a windmill. Lizzi uttered a curious tight squeal, and her long arms gathered him in around his heaving middle....She gave him a good push and they fell backward clutched together, her long active legs overwhelmed him, she rolled him over flat on his back...Lizzi was spread upon him like a fallen tent full of poles....'

Herr Rieber's passion for flesh and conquest is defeated, turned into grief, by the vigorous surrender that has swept him into unorthodox subordination, and he can get rid of his victorious victim, who is in a 'carnivorous trance,' only by gasping to her in agony that they are watched by Bebe, that fat and generally seasick dog of Professor Hutten. Bebe, only three feet away, 'the folds of his nose twitching, regarded them with an expression of animal cunning that most embarrassingly resembled human knowledge of the seamy side of life.' After all the modern solemnities about sex, this sheer farce—with the farcical morality of the dog as grace censor—is reassuring evidence that a fuller, more flexible, less doleful sense of sexual contact can be recovered.

For a final note on Miss Porter's great range, we can contrast this hilarious Smollettian jest with two quite dissimilar passages. One is the vivid imaging, in her visible gestures, of the inner unwellness of a Spanish countess: 'Thumbs turned in lightly to the palm, the hands moved aimlessly from the edge of the table to her lap, they clasped and unclasped themselves, spread themselves flat in the air, closed, shook slightly, went to her hair, to the bosom of her gown, as if by a life of their own separate from the will of the woman herself, who sat quite still otherwise, features a little rigid, bending over to read the dinner card beside her plate.' Though here there is a more detailed visualization of the symbolized object, the feeling for the troubled personality is like Charlotte Bronte's. To this Countess, Dr. Schumann feels attracted, guiltily. After seeing her, 'He lay down with his rosary in his fingers'...In the meditative element, in the imaging of a remembered frenzy, and most of all in the particular moral sense that leads to the words 'soul estranged from its kind,' the account is reminiscent of Conrad....

Often, too, there is direct juxtaposition of different styles. Miss Porter can write page after page of sonorous periods—plausible, not overplayed—for Professor Hutten's dinner disquisitions to a captive audience, and then shift bluntly to Frau Hutten's perspective: 'He was boring them to death again, she could feel it like vinegar in her veins'—another trenchant simile....In their slangy vigor or insouciance, their blunt and easy immediacy, their spurning of the genteel, their casual clinicality, their nervous grip on strain and tension, some of these passages have an air that, whether in self-understanding or self-love, we call 'modern.' The novel has many such, and they evidence in another way the range of Miss Porter's style. However, the modernity need be stressed only enough to acknowledge that the style, like any well-wrought individual style, cannot be wholly placed by comparison with well-known styles. My principal points, nevertheless, have been that Miss Porter's style has strong affiliations with the Austen and Eliot styles, that its main lines are traditional rather than innovating, and that it is markedly devoid of namable singularities, mannerisms, private idioms, self-indulgent or striven-for-unique-nesses that give a special coloration....

To claim for a writer affinities with Austen and Eliot (and to note, as evidence of her variety, occasional reminiscences of other writers) may seem faint praise...To note a resemblance in styles is not to make premature judgments of over-all merit...It is not to suggest influences, imitation, idle repetition, failure of

originality, or limitedness. On the contrary, it is a way of suggesting superiority in the individual achievement: here is a writer working independently, composing out of her own genius, and yet in her use of the language exhibiting admirable qualities that seem akin to those of distinguished predecessors. It is a way of proposing, perhaps, that she has got hold of some central virtues of the language, virtues whether of strength of grace, that tend to recur and that, whatever the modification of them from writer to writer, may in essence be inseparable from good writing. To say this is to imply a traditional style, or core of elements of style....a group of long-enduring ways of using the language, apparent norms of utility, representative workings-out of possibility....To call a writer a traditionalist in style would involve the old paradox of unique personality seizing on the universal thing or mode.”

Robert B. Heilman  
“*Ship of Fools: Notes on Style*”  
*Katherine Anne Porter: A Critical Symposium*  
George Core and Lodwick Hartley, eds.  
(U Georgia 1969)

“Katherine Anne Porter, from the first appearance of her stories, made her mark and impressed other writers by the way she wrote. It is not always easy to define her purity of style. The writing is not plain, and yet it is not especially decorative either; instead, it is clear, fluent, almost untroubled. Everything necessary seems at hand: language and scenery, psychology and memory, and a bright aesthetic intelligence that shapes the whole....The completed work as we not have it does not reveal any deformation of character, and indeed is expansive enough in theme and achievement to satisfy the claims of her high reputation.”

Elizabeth Hardwick  
“Katherine Anne Porter” (1982)  
*American Fictions*  
(The Modern Library 1999) 305

“When she was praised as a stylist, she said she was furious, because the important thing was not the style but what she had to say....*Pale Horse, Pale Rider*...The praise could hardly have been higher. Ralph Thompson wrote in the *New York Times* that although she had been called a brilliant stylist she had nothing like a ‘manner’ and no stylish preciosity. ‘Her work...is of unmistakable quality, simple in pattern, substantial, honestly moving.’ In the *New York Herald Tribune*, Lewis Gannett called her one of the greatest American writers. Paul Rosenfeld told readers of the *Saturday Review of Literature* that she moved in the illustrious company headed by Hawthorne, Flaubert, and Henry James. Clifton Fadiman said in the *New Yorker* that she shared with Hemingway and a mere scattering of other writers both the will and the ability to create by suggestion, and Glenway Wescott, in a *Southern Review* article...compared *Noon Wine* to *Paradise Lost*. Wallace Stegner...wrote in the *Virginia Quarterly Review* that she was one of the surest and most subtle craftsmen now writing....She forged out of the soft rhythms of southern speech and the racy idioms of her native Texas a unique style, at once elegant and tough, lyrical and vigorous, formal and witty, truly a classical style.”

Joan Givner  
*Katherine Anne Porter: A Life*  
(Simon and Schuster 1982) 137, 314, 511

“Porter’s style is not so instantly recognizable as, say, Faulkner’s or Hemingway’s. But her range is tremendous....Her style seems to follow theme and subject matter. But always her language is beautifully exact, pictorial, rhythmically balanced. She is not afraid of adjectives and rich imagery. The first sentence of the second paragraph of ‘The Grave’ illustrates her skill. The reader’s imagination moves from the abstract (‘Family cemetery’) to a slightly more concrete image (‘pleasant, small, neglected garden’) to a carefully chosen and precisely qualified description of objects in the garden. At the end of the sentence, the reader is submerged in the ‘uncropped sweet-smelling wild grass.’ Each noun and adjective brings the reader deeper into the story....The themes are developed as much through language as through plot....The language reflects the changed sensibility of Miranda....More by means of the sounds and the imagery than by what could be paraphrased as meaning, the reader understands that Miranda has become reconciled with the ‘mingled sweetness and corruption’ of her life.”



Wilfred Stone, Nancy Huddleston Packer, Robert Hoopes, eds.  
*The Short Story: An Introduction*  
(McGraw-Hill 1976, 1983) 359-60

“Almost deceptively simple, the story [*Noon Wine*] well illustrates that quality of limpidness and textual perfection that has both established Porter’s reputation as a stylist, a ‘classical writer,’ and made her work so resistant to definition. It is as if the actual verbal structure of the story were simply a transparency laid over a set of real objects and scenes....in what Robert Penn Warren has called ‘a kind of indicative poetry.’ The author seems to step aside and let her rigorously selected details establish themselves autonomously. That is, the style of *Noon Wine* is not at all an external decoration draped over the skeleton of a story. Indeed, the difficulty of determining what the story is ‘about’ is that its style and its substance are so inseparable....The frequently noted economy of Porter’s style is particularly evident here in the way she establishes an aura of mystery surrounding Mr. Helton....

Critics have praised her as a stylist, extolling the clarity and spareness of her language and its aptness to her concise forms....Critics who have spoken of her concise style as her most notable characteristic have been essentially correct, but have not accorded their perception its full weight....The same standard that informs her judgment of character and her own artistic presence informs her dry, quiet style....Porter equates restraint with honesty and authenticity...In this way, as in others, Porter is closely akin to Jane Austen...For Porter, as for Austen, manner is not just surface, but a revelation of essence. Manner, or style, is an indicator of character.”

Janis P. Stout  
“Mr. Hatch’s Volubility and Miss Porter’s Reserve”  
*Essays in Literature* 12.2 (Fall 1985) 285-93

“Porter’s grand design and her secondary themes are dramatized by recurring characters and supported by her style. Her style has been described consistently as pure, simple, beautiful; it is also decidedly classical. She was the careful crafter of fiction, using the classical concept of the artist as ‘maker’ to describe the work of the artist. She often spoke of the James-minded people and the Whitman-minded people and declared that she, herself, was firmly on the side of James...

Within the overall simplicity of her style and the evidence of careful craftsmanship, other classical elements are apparent. Immediately noticeable is Porter’s plain vocabulary, which belies the complexity of her artistic vision. She once told an interviewer, ‘There is a basic pure human speech that exists in every language. And that is the language of the poet and the writer.’ She attacked ‘scientific language’ and ‘the jargon of trades’ and went on to explain: ‘You have to speak clearly and simply and purely in a language that a six-year-old child can understand; and yet have meanings and the overtones of language, and the implications, that appeal to the highest intelligence—that is, the highest intelligence that one is able to reach. I’m not sure that I’m able to appeal to the highest intelligence, but I’m willing to try.’

The logical ordering of her syntax is also rooted in classical rhetoric. She favored compound and periodic sentences with coordinating conjunctions that led easily to Homeric rhythms and catalogues, which often appear in the form of parallel grammatical structures. Such an example occurs in a description of Juan in ‘*Maria Concepcion*’: ‘He was walking in the early sunshine smelling the good smells of ripening cactus-figs, peaches, and melons, of pungent berries dangling from the pepper trees, and the smoke of his cigarette under his nose.’ Robert B. Heilman identifies numerous examples of this stylistic trait in *Ship of Fools*. Liberman cites in ‘*Old Mortality*’ an excellent representative of Porter’s periodic sentences, which, in his words, represent ‘in language...a world properly and permanently ordered’....: ‘During vacation on their grandmother’s farm, Maria and Miranda, who read as naturally and constantly as ponies crop grass, and with much the same kind of pleasure, had by some happy chance laid hold of some forbidden reading matter, brought in and left there with missionary intent, no doubt, by some Protestant cousin.’

Liberman explains, ‘To the end of periodicity, “forbidden reading matter” is brought in nearly at the conclusion, only ahead of “missionary intent” and “Protestant cousin”.’ With its delayed emphasis, the syntax sets up the tension in the story between opposing values within the Southern setting. Such syntax also reveals Porter’s respect for the classical laws of unity and coherence. Porter’s classical rhetoric

becomes an instrument of detachment, which also is achieved by one of her point-of-view techniques that is a form of stream of consciousness. Although Porter often presents dialogue and thoughts directly, equally often she presents dialogue and thoughts indirectly, without quotation marks, as if the statements or thoughts have been melted down in the author's consciousness, condensed, and shaped for the reader's apprehension. For example, all of 'Rope' is presented in this form of distilled and detached dialogue. Whenever Porter uses the method, the irony in the work is amplified.

Porter's irony is sometimes simply verbal and at other times tragic and cosmic. She achieves structural irony in the Miranda stories, in which the simplicity of a younger Miranda's viewpoint is measured against the viewpoint of an older and wiser Miranda, and dramatic irony occurs when Miranda's naivete contrasts with the greater knowledge of the reader. T. S. Eliot said that such a juxtaposition of viewpoints constituted within a work 'an internal equilibrium' that was essential to irony. I. A. Richards' similar concept of irony as a balance of opposites was developed by Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks, and others of Porter's twentieth-century contemporaries and friends into a theory that the greatest works incorporate the writer's own 'ironic' awareness of opposite and complementary attitudes. Warren describes Porter's irony as 'irony with a center, never irony for its own sake. It simply implies,' he says, 'a refusal to accept the formula, the ready-made solution, the hand-me-down morality, the word for the spirit. It affirms, rather, the constant need for exercising discrimination, the arduous obligation of the intellect in the face of conflicting dogmas, the need for exercising as much of the human faculty as possible.'

Although irony creates subtle complexities within Porter's art, perhaps the greatest difficulty within her style has been her symbolism, which has generally presented readers with enigmas. Much critical controversy has surrounded the symbolic meaning of the dove, ring, and grave in 'The Grave,' the flowering judas tree in 'Flowering Judas,' the cracked looking-glass in 'The Cracked Looking-Glass,' the leaning tower in 'The Leaning Tower,' the rope in 'Rope,' the purse in 'Theft,' and the dreams in 'Maria Concepcion,' 'Flowering Judas,' 'Pale Horse, Pale Rider,' 'The Leaning Tower,' and *Ship of Fools*. Porter, who told an interviewer, 'I never consciously took or adopted a symbol in my life,' on another occasion explained her understanding of symbolism in literature: 'Symbolism happens of its own self and it comes out of something so deep in your own consciousness and your own experience that I don't think that most writers are at all conscious of their use of symbols. I never am until I see them. They come of themselves because they belong to me and have meaning to me, but they come of themselves. I have no way of explaining them....And I suppose you don't invent symbolism.'

The importance Porter gave to symbols is often confirmed in the titles she chose for her stories. The dominant symbol is often in a story's title, as it is in 'The Circus,' 'The Fig Tree,' 'The Grave,' 'Flowering Judas,' 'That Tree,' 'Rope,' 'Hacienda,' 'The Cracked Looking-Glass,' and 'The Leaning Tower'.... Animals and birds are important in Porter's fiction, and although they may exist as living entities that take on symbolic meaning (such as the rabbit in 'The Grave'), often they are presented only figuratively, usually in similes but sometimes in metaphors, serving as instruments of Porter's essentially humanistic philosophy. Her technique may have grown out of her familiarity with the Homeric simile, which often depended on a comparison with animal nature. She implies that animals offer to humans the opportunity for discerning an important truth. If humans can identify with animals and then perceive the difference between themselves and animals, they have understood the human soul and the meaning of human life. It is the fundamental truth young Miranda acquires, and it is the fundamental truth that many passengers on board the *Vera* in *Ship of Fools* miss.

Porter's style changed little over the years. The same pure language of 'Maria Concepcion' exists in *Ship of Fools*, as do the same grammatical structures and diction. If there is any difference, it is that the irony of the first story is intensified in the long novel. Porter's style is recognizably classical in its orderliness and clarity, but it is hers in the fusion of its classical elements to its intensity and its irony, with built-in paradoxes, which Warren described as its 'tissue of contradictions'....She is a realist in the complete sense of both style and theme, in her careful attention to the details of verisimilitude, and in her insistence upon the pragmatic function of will within the boundaries of natural, universal laws. Those who would grasp Porter's meanings should recognize first the arduous quest for truth that underlies the canon and then the classical humanism that infuses her work. The style grows out of her worldview and is consistent with it."

Darlene Harbour Unrue  
*Understanding Katherine Anne Porter*  
(U South Carolina 1988) 13-19

“In this story [“Theft”] she also achieved complete mastery of the lyrical style for which she became celebrated, capable of great virtuosity and yet always held in restraint and never overworked. The story opens in a low-keyed prosaic way, but as the climax approaches and the woman’s thought processes quicken, it soars to a poetic intensity which makes it completely arresting and dramatic. That it should be so is a feat, since the subject matter is so psychological and internal. The dramatic and moral impact of the story is reinforced by a discreet use of symbolism. The characters’ biblical quotations and blasphemies take on a special significance, as do the woman’s purse and the cup of coffee which goes cold on the table during her moment of self-revelation. The only bold stroke is that the woman who steals the purse is graphically depicted as a devil as tangible as that which Porter once believed lived in her grandmother’s closet. She has red eyes which flash fire, a coal-blackened face, and she is stoking up a fiery furnace. While the symbolism effectively emphasizes the moral point, the description is entirely plausible on the literal level since the woman is a janitress. Such symbolic naturalism became an inherent part of Porter’s method.”

Joan Givner  
*Katherine Anne Porter: A Life*, revised edition  
(U Georgia 1982, 1991) 206

“The essence of Porter’s reputation has been her recognition as a stylist. She wrote prose of a disciplined elegance and luminousness [luminosity] that have seemed to many readers to achieve a kind of perfection....It is the distinctive limpidness of her compressed style, together with her subtle symbolism, that is her hallmark....An honest or ‘clean’ style was for Porter an indication of integrity. Truth and truth telling were not only represented by but enacted in a verbal style of unevasive, uncomplicating restraint, even of ‘clean’ minimalism....The style becomes the person and represents or even constitutes the theme. Style, then, is both a medium for conveying values and a symbolic enactment of those values....Those whose speech is excessive, either unrestrained or forced, are thereby revealed as unreliable, devious, or simply undisciplined. Those who have something to hide throw up a smokescreen of words. Those characterized by personal authenticity and directness are generally spare of speech....

The rhetorical style shared by Miranda and Adam [*Pale Horse, Pale Rider*] both establishes their honesty with each other and measures the dishonesty and inauthenticity of those around them. That is, their rhetoric is a symbolic ethical standard. Its style is compressed, understated, and witty—the conversational equivalent of Porter’s own mature style....They converse, and Miranda even dreams, in the epitome of Porter’s own compressed style, which takes on a symbolic power....She had developed a style that combined compression and visual impact in a distinctive way—a style clear-edged, simplified, and often related to the art of caricature she knew well from her close acquaintance with Mexican caricaturists and her own production of caricature drawings.”

Janis P. Stout  
*Katherine Anne Porter: A Sense of the Times*  
(U Virginia 1995) 31, 85, 249-53

“She was in line with Eliot and Pound in her predilection for an ‘older’ literature (Homer through the eighteenth century) that could be transformed into ‘new’ literature and for classical concepts of control and purity of language. [Neoclassicism] She was quick to disparage writers she considered effusive, verbose, unrestrained (she often named Walt Whitman and Thomas Wolfe as examples of that school).”

Darlene Harbour Unrue  
*Selected Letters of Katherine Anne Porter: Chronicles of a Modern Woman*  
(U Mississippi 2012) xxiii

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 20<sup>th</sup> 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.

## 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 Jilting 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 fiction than in any other writers except Hawthorne, Melville, Faulkner, Gordon, and Stafford: “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.

Michael Hollister (2017)