

Katherine Anne Porter

(1890-1980)

Liberals (1933)

Life is a substance they cannot get the feel of
Goldfish or quicksilver here and yonder it slips;
Given their choice, which they haven't, they'd rather
Go down to the boisterous sea, but not in ships.

So they go instead to live in the deep country,
But it is not in their plan to follow a plough;
They love to eat what they neither sow nor gather,
They would live simply if some one told them how.

They come back to the city where everything's cut on the bias
They point by turns with pride and view with alarm
Call for reform which they find is too much bother,
On principal they're against war, and afraid to disarm.

They would do all sorts of brave things if they dared, but they dare not.
It would get them in trouble with living, breathing men:
So they stay in that soft land where Wish is the father
To a liud cuckoo in a nest built by the wren.....

ANALYSIS

“Her declaration that pure art cannot be doctrinaire was a critical stand she was to take throughout her life and to illustrate in the best of her works.... In 1933 Porter...wrote a poem that was uncharacteristic of her and a violation of her stand on the separation of art and politics. Never published, the poem was titled ‘Liberals’ and dated by Porter as ‘166 Boulevard Montparnasse, Paris, 1933.’ It is an openly political diatribe, and Porter may have been exercising her art only in an attempt to get a nettlesome idea off her mind. Certainly she had strong ideas about politics, but usually she reserved such polemics for nonfiction, that is, letters, essays, or book reviews. Long before 1933 Porter had come to view extreme political positions with distaste, and while her sympathies generally tended more toward liberalism (when forced to choose categories, she described herself politically as a ‘liberal Democrat’), from time to time she was as disenchanted with liberals as she was the ‘fascist-minded.’ Her years in between-the-wars Paris were such a period.

‘Liberals’ is a loosely structured poem of four *abcb* stanzas in which alliteration is the primary musical feature. Two metaphors and several allusions constitute the figurative language of the poem. Life is represented by ‘goldfish or quicksilver,’ and apathy is represented by ‘a soft land.’ Allusions to a medieval carol (‘Summer is icumen in’), Psalm 107, and Shakespeare’s *Richard III* and *Henry IV, Part II* establish a standard which the ‘liberals’ badly fail to meet. It is high irony and a technique for satire that Porter will develop in *Ship of Fools*....

Although she was momentarily attracted again to the liberalism and the bohemianism of New York, by the end of [1936] she was complaining that all her old friends in New York had ‘turned Communist’ and were ‘trying to convert’ her. She said they used ‘all the arguments’ she had given them in 1924-1927 but that ‘they have forgotten all about that’.”

Darlene Harbour Unrue
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