

ANALYSIS

“The Leaning Tower” (1941)

Katherine Anne Porter

(1890-1980)

“Her picture of Berlin in the Isherwood period is eerie and searching. She sees everything that disturbs. She notices peculiar local things that one realizes afterwards are true: how often, for example, the Berliners’ eyes filled with tears when they were suddenly faced with small dilemmas. Hysteria is near to the surface. Yet the tears were a kind of mannerism. 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.”

V. S. Pritchett
New Statesman (1944)

“We have again the rare combination of virtuosity with moral penetration. Here Miss Porter uses a controlling symbol in the way that James often did, since the leaning tower not only is a souvenir of the Berlin landlady’s long past happiness in Italy, but also becomes a compelling image for the tottering balance of the German world in the year before Hitler’s rise to power. Many best-selling accounts have now been written of that time, and yet it seems doubtful whether any of them will preserve its form and pressure longer than Miss Porter’s presentation of it through the consciousness of a young American painter.... Some of Miss Porter’s ‘fine touches’ consist in her recurrent stress on the city’s poverty, through Charles Upton’s gradual realization of the difference from the depression he had left behind at home, where everybody took it for granted that things would improve, whereas in Berlin ‘the sufferers seemed to know that they had no cause for hope.’ No journalist or social historian analyzing the collapse of the republic has come closer to the central cause....

A comparison with Christopher Isherwood’s *Goodbye to Berlin* is instructive. Isherwood looked back to the same kind of student and boarding house life, and he dealt more explicitly with some of the manifestations of social decay. But his characters seem self-consciously worked up from a Freudian handbook, or they exist to shock like the figures in a cinema thriller. They have none of the deep authenticity that springs from Miss Porter’s humility and tenderness before life. She has been able to apprehend many kinds of Germans, ranging from the lumpish solemn mathematician who ‘loves study and quiet’ to the young aristocrat whose new cheek-wound brings out in his expression a mixture of ‘amazing arrogance, pleasure, inexpressible vanity and self-satisfaction.’ Miss Porter does not slight the bestial brutalities in this hard city. No more, however, does she indulge in easy propaganda....

As she brings her group of students close together for a moment of New Year’s Eve conviviality, what reverberates through their every speech and gesture is a premonition of disaster. In writing of Miss Welty, Miss Porter warned against political beliefs, but here we can see that her remark was not the reactionary one that such a remark generally is. For she has penetrated into the economic and social sicknesses that brought on Fascism, but she has also held to her knowledge that the realm of the creator of fiction must be broader and more resilient than theories or opinions.”

F. O. Matthiessen
“‘That True and Human World’”
Accent 5 (Winter 1945) 121-23

“Whether one is exiled willingly or unwillingly from his own heritage, he finds himself in an alien culture which often permits him to discover the inherent nature of human evil. ‘The Leaning Tower’ takes this as its thesis, with its depiction of a young American artist in Nazi Germany in the days when the beast is beginning to emerge once more from its subconscious jungle. This novella is profitably compared with the final chapters of Thomas Wolfe’s *You Can’t Go Home Again* and Christopher Isherwood’s *Goodbye to Berlin*, which utilize the same fictional situation. Both Wolfe and Isherwood are content to evoke a general

mood of brutality and totalitarianism; Miss Porter clothes it in flesh in the persons of Hans, Otto, and Lutte. Where Wolfe editorializes, using such words as 'evil,' 'brutal,' and 'stupid,' Miss Porter simply and severely records the reactions of a decent, essentially unvoiced young man to the revealing but unspectacular behavior of three young Germans, an Austrian, and a Pole. Thus embodied, Nazism is a tangibly, recognizably ugly aspect of humanity rather than the vaguely terrifying, whispered accounts of 'those people' to be found in Wolfe's version."

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

"'The Leaning Tower' takes place in Berlin, between Christmas and the end of December in [1931]. Hitler is mentioned only once...and then only indirectly. A barber wants to cut Charles's hair in the long-on-top, clipped-to-the-skin manner of 'a little shouting politician' whose photograph is stuck in a corner of the mirror. But the spirit of Hitler is everywhere in the story, which is a sort of advance exercise for *Ship of Fools*. The evil of the voices shrieking at the stumbling clown that haunted Miranda in 'The Circus,' the wickedness of the parents who try to kill [debatable] their idiot child in 'He,' and the devilry of Homer T. Hatch closing in on the unoffending harmonica player in *Noon Wine*, are all to be found in the streets of a depressed Berlin....

Charles, the young American painter, poor by American standards and rich by German, finds himself everywhere resented. When he accidentally breaks the delicate plaster ribs of a tiny model of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, an absurd ornament, as cheap as it is sentimental, he finds that his landlady is anguished. It is to her a precious memento of the better days when she and her husband traveled in Italy, an all too fragile reminder of her own fragile memory of beauty in softer climates, happier worlds. Rosa is a bleak Northerner fated to destroy what she cannot enjoy. When Berlin tries to decorate itself, it only makes itself uglier—at least, Rosa's Berlin and the Berlin of her boarders, the silly Heidelberg student nursing his dueling scar and the heavy Bavarian bumpkin studying mathematics. Charles is appalled by the neighborhood....

Charles meets his fellow boarders, and they exchange views. Otto Bussen, the bumpkin, desperate with poverty, makes an unsuccessful attempt to poison himself. The others, Hans von Gehring, the Heidelberg student, and Tadeusz Mey, a Polish pianist, help Charles to revive him. Then they all celebrate New Year's Eve at a cheap nightclub.... Their discussion presages the war that is to come. Von Gehring wants the war; he looks forward eagerly to Germany's revenge. The mistakes of 1914-18 will not be repeated. Bussen is the German dreamer as opposed to the German militarist; he abhors the idea of carnage, but he recognizes that he will do as he is bid and that von Gehring represents the class that will decide these things for him. Mey, the Pole, perfectly understands that von Gehring and Bussen will destroy him, while all three are united in their hatred of Charles as the representative of that distant rich democracy across the seas, so outrageously and undeservedly immune from the woes and strains of the old world.

Yet Charles is far from happy in his immunity. He feels confused and vaguely guilty; like all of his nation he would like to be loved. That night he breathes in the hopelessness of Europe's plight. He sees with despair that there is no arresting all the horror that is bound to erupt from this dull, stale, cold, hungry Berlin with its daily chant of hate. The silly little plastic tower is the symbol of Germany's sentimentalization of a culture that it is about to extinguish.

'The Leaning Tower'...starts magnificently...to translate into fiction the origins of a world war.... She was indeed to trace this failure to its sources, but it was to take her twenty years. She began *Ship of Fools* in 1941 and completed it in 1961. For all its popular success one heard constantly, during the year in which it topped the best seller lists, that it was too gloomy, too saturnine, that there were no 'nice' people in it, and that bad as things were, they were not *that* bad. It was sometimes hard to believe that people making these remarks had lived through an era of human atrocities unparalleled in the recorded history of mankind. It is perfectly true, of course, that war, when it came, produced examples of courage and fortitude as inspiring as the bestiality in Nazi Germany had been depressing, but that was not the subject of Miss Porter's inquiry. She was not tracing what had occurred *after* Hitler challenged the world, but what had produced the challenge.... She knew that the terrible thing that had happened in the 1930's had happened in the hearts of men."

Louis Auchincloss
Pioneers and Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Women Novelists
(U Minnesota 1961) 143-46

“‘The Leaning Tower’ must...have served as a study for the future greater undertaking [*Ship of Fools*]: a tale of Berlin on the eve of the Nazi revolution, when in fact Katherine Anne spent a winter there, and saw the dangerousness of the Germans, and understood how risky it was to fear them or, on the other hand, to be too simply prejudiced against them. Doubtless also while writing it, during World War II, she was aware of the aesthetic pitfall of propagandizing in any sense, with the excitement of the time. She holds her breath in it.”

Glenway Wescott
“Katherine Anne Porter Personally”
Images of Truth: Remembrances and Criticism
(Random House 1962)

“Charles Upton, having heard in his childhood of the wonders of Berlin from one of his friends, has come from America to Germany in the winter of 1931 to study art. Moving from a dreary hotel into a rooming house run by a middle-aged Viennese woman, Charles becomes acquainted with the woman’s three other lodgers: Hans von Gehring, a Heidelberg student who is in Berlin to have an infected dueling scar treated; Tadeusz Mey, a Polish pianist; and Otto Bussen, a peasant-born student of mathematics from the University of Berlin. A good deal of the story is made up of talk among the four roomers, much of it about various nationalities and classes in their different backgrounds. It all ends in a New Year’s Eve drinking party at a small restaurant run by two friends of Otto, where the mixture of politics, sex...and mutual distrust appears intended to render the dislocated world of Germany in the 1930’s and to foreshadow the violent events to come.... The ornament [Leaning Tower of Pisa] is returned the night of the party, imperfectly mended, to serve as a symbol for the futile attempts of man to hold onto memories and dreams, perhaps, in its mending, symbolic of the fate of German society between the two wars.”

Ray B. West, Jr.
Katherine Anne Porter
(U Minnesota 1963) 31-32

“The atmosphere of ‘The Leaning Tower’ tends toward the tragic. It sets out to show how in the last days of the Weimar Republic not only Berlin but all Germany was a prison house, full of poverty, fear, and frustrations out of which Nazism was inevitably bred. Hans, the Heidelberg student with the festered saber scar, is youthfully arrogant; Herr Bussen, the University student, is proud in his poverty; and Frau Rosa Reichl, a bitterly nostalgic Viennese aristocrat reduced to keeping a pension, takes out her frustration by tyrannizing over her paying guests. In the dilemmas of all these Miss Porter sees the desperate hopelessness of an excessively nationalistic people.... Both in ‘The Leaning Tower’ and *Ship of Fools* Miss Porter indicates that she at an early stage unerringly sensed in the German character the destructive elements that would produce the holocaust of World War II....

The central symbol of the story is a little plaster cast model of the Leaning Tower, a memento of Frau Reichl’s honeymoon, that Charles Upton, an American student, accidentally breaks and later finds pitifully restored in a patched up condition—a representation (as others have pointed out) of the determination of the German people to restore their past, however shoddily, after the ruin of World War I, a ruin perversely attributed to the Americans.”

Lodwick Hartley
“Dark Voyagers: A Study of Katherine Anne Porter’s *Ship of Fools*”
University Review (Winter 1963)

“[This] is Miss Porter’s fullest presentation of the protagonist as artist.... The story covers a short period in the life of Charles Upton, a young artist from Texas visiting the Berlin of 1931 in which Hitler is beginning his rise to power. It concentrates upon the atmosphere of the city and the character of the German people as seen by the young man. Its simple plot records a suicide attempt by a young German

boarder in the house where Charles is staying, several conversations in the rooming house, and a long discussion of Germany, Europe, and American at a New Year's party in a newly-opened cabaret....

The Berliners are repeatedly portrayed as pig-like, malicious, and sentimental. Charles sketches many of them, emphasizing their unpleasant features... The fragile tower is intended to represent the precarious German culture, once nearly destroyed by a crude America.... It is only when he feels himself most strongly attracted to Germany in the person of Lutte, the beautiful model, that he first senses his danger. He has already seen, in Rosa's special affection for Hans and her admiration for his [dueling] wound, that these Germans stick together; and he will soon have another lesson in the form of Lutte's preference for Hans over himself.

It gradually becomes clear that all the characters of 'The Leaning Tower' are designed with allegorical precision to represent larger political realities. Charles, the innocent American, thinks in terms of individuals rather than of nations.... He cannot understand why the Germans consider him rich and dislike and exploit him accordingly.... He learns with surprise that Hans is content to follow his family's orders even in the matter of marriage. Throughout the story his individual experiences have generalizing overtones. In the multilingual Tadeusz he encounters the culture, historical sense, and disillusioned wisdom of Europe. Hans embodies the Germany of militarism, racist pride, and bitter resentment of defeat; his [dueling] wound, painful and festering, symbolizes well all these qualities and their combined unwholesomeness. The 'amazing arrogance, pleasure, inexpressible vanity and self-satisfaction' which Charles sees in the German's face when he speaks of his wound trouble him deeply. He sees the [dueling] custom as something which would be admired in no country but Germany... It is one of the major causes of the ominous chill of death he feels in Berlin.

Rosa is the Germany of sentimentalism and bitterly-felt poverty, strongly partial to the militaristic Hans. Lutte, the treacherous beauty certainly not typical of Germany yet a vessel of German pride, is also enamored of Hans. Otto Bussen represents the Germany of the scientist and scholar, and also of the peasant, driven to the point of suicide by the recent sufferings and present uneasiness of his country. He is, as Tadeusz points out, not very different from the peasants of other European nations. He is disdained by Hans and bullied by Rosa.... Death is the ultimate meaning of the mysterious threat Charles feels in the air of Berlin and of the warlike instinct which seems to govern European developments.... Herr Bussen's suicide attempt concretely embodies the death theme and brings home to Charles the poverty and depression of the German people.... It is at the news of the suicide attempt that Charles first feels the 'chill and the knowledge of death' which overcomes him at the end of the story....

Charles Upton is almost identical with Miranda in the essential qualities of artistic sensitivity, self-awareness, and insight into his surroundings, and like her he confronts the deepest mysteries.... His sketching is interchangeable with Miranda's writing... He is at the center of a number of concentric circles each of which is destructively oppressive—the hotel, Berlin, Europe, the world.... He has learned...that the Europe which he had always considered so remote and peaceful is in reality a writhing tangle of hatred and violence, and that his own country, even the world, is part of this intricate network of evil.... Darkness and cold, frequently emphasized, are objective correlatives of oppression, as is dullness... A long string of salesladies and landladies impose upon him their greed and sentimentality so that he constantly feels guilty of some vague offense against them... After he escapes with great difficulty from his first hotel, he ends up in the barely tolerable house of Rosa Reichl, who annoys him by her intrusions into his privacy and tries to make him agree to stay for six months instead of three....

Berlin is oppressive for all the characters, even the Germans. No one praises Berlin, its weather, its culture, its dialect, or its people. All the outsiders seem to have come by accident like Charles, or under constraint, and to want to escape as soon as possible.... Everywhere there is heaviness.... Houses and rooms are vulgarly ornate and cluttered with bric-a-brac.... He gradually works off his anger by drawing caricatures of the people around him, beginning as he does so to feel more sympathetic toward them. 'They were all good people, they were in terrible trouble, jammed up together in this little flat with not enough air or space or money, not enough of anything, no place to go, nothing to do but gnaw each other. I can always go home, he told himself... It is impossible not to be struck by the feeling and imaginative vigor with which this author describes the hatefulness of being crowded....

Real escape is, in fact, impossible for all of them, for the oppression which is now concentrated in Berlin is spreading to include the world. Even the Germans try unsatisfactory escapes—to the future, to the past, to study, to the mountains, to Hollywood—but all are at best temporary and despair prevails, even, apparently, over Charles. He does have a refuge from present troubles in his art, which is not an ignoble escape but a means whereby the artist transcends his personal concerns and achieves a deeper sympathy for others. It may state as venomous caricature but it requires a direct and unselfconscious gaze at the object which leads to understanding. The art theme is, however, only incidental in the story and seems to be swallowed up in the general despair. In his early dream of the burning house which looks like the leaning tower, Charles sees himself as escaping unharmed carrying a heavy suitcase containing ‘all the drawings he meant to do in his whole life,’ but by the end of the story he has lost this naïve sense of detachment. ‘The Leaning Tower’ is not about art but about the modern world, and its message seems to be despair. Insofar as it is a political story its statement is largely justified by the war which followed.”

William L. Nance
Katherine Anne Porter & the Art of Rejection
(U North Carolina 1963) 69-79

“Miss Porter can reverse the binoculars either way; she is after the small despot as well as the large one. No one knows better than she that tyranny begins at home. The egotism, pride and self-pity of the Germans in ‘The Leaning Tower’ have their domestic counterparts in an American family in ‘The Downward Path to Wisdom’.... The little boy, unlike some of the characters in ‘The Leaning Tower,’ has not yet learned to hate whole races and nations.”

Howard Moss
New York Times Book Review
(12 September 1965) 26

“The novel may be divided into five major parts: the café as a place of memory, of Charles’s childhood illusions of Germany and the reality; the search for a new room and the exit from the hotel; the new room and the inhabitants of the pension; the night club; and the final revelation in the room. Charles Upton, the central character, from whose point of view we see the events, is given a background similar to Miss Porter’s. Sensitive but, like Miranda, naïve, he came from a Central Texas farming family with Kentucky ties; and he had, against the initial wishes of his family, been interested in art—just as Miss Porter, against the wishes of her family and society, had determined to be a writer. He had come to Berlin largely because of his boyhood friendship with Kuno Hillentafel, whose mother was alleged to have been a countess. Through a romantic projection of Kuno’s descriptions, Charles had imagined Berlin to be a great city of castles towering in the mists.

Alone in the strange city of Berlin that Christmas season, left with his memories of Kuno, who had died on one of the trips to the homeland, Charles had found the city depressing; he escaped his hotel and sat in the café where he could see clearly the illusion and the reality. Among the heavy buildings were heavy, pig-like people or slim young students all dressed alike; he had seen in his few days in the city the desperate poverty of the country, the streetwalkers, and the beggars. His impressions had been harsh and poignant: he had seen fat Germans peering at displays of candied pigs, pig worshipers holding up their dachshunds to see the display, and he had had a poverty-stricken, fearful shopkeeper sell him wrong-sized socks because she had to make a sale.

The shock of being in a strange city and culture had unsexed him, and he had been unable to show interest in the streetwalkers. His impressions were not ordered, allowing him to generalize about the German society which he found disturbing. His was not a reflective mind; he was storing his impressions for his drawings, drawings which could be brutally accurate, as when he drew the hotel owners: the woman as a sick fox and the man as half pig, half tiger. He felt completely isolated in the society; for, the larger the crowd he found himself in, the more isolated he became.

The rush of impressions subsided as Charles set out to search for a room, for the rooms fell into an easily distinguished pattern of stuffy, faded elegance or of expensive modernity. At the apartment of Frau Rosa Reichl—whose name is particularly appropriate because she had once been rich, employed many servants, but now lived in reduced but not poverty-stricken circumstances—he was impressed by a bare

hallway; but the room itself was standard, with heavy drapes and carpets, massive furniture, whatnots. Charles accidentally broke her plaster souvenir of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, a tottering structure in actuality and, in replica, a fitting symbol of a society soon to topple again. Americans had in 1917-18 helped topple German society, and Frau Reichl was not unaware of the significance of Charles's act. Outwardly she saw the fragile souvenir as a memento of her honeymoon, but it had come to be a symbol of the old days that had long passed. Charles knew that she was thinking that she should not have left it out for crude foreigners to touch.

When Charles announced his intentions of leaving the hotel, all civility fled from the hotel owners. He was outrageously overcharged, threatened with police action if he did not pay the bill as it was submitted, intimidated by passport inspection—experienced travelers had told him he would feel like a criminal while traveling in Germany. The outward brutality and bestiality disappeared once he moved into Rosa's room. On the day of his move, he learned, in a quiet scene in a barber shop, that a shouting politician (obviously Hitler) had made one particular hair style popular.

The third section of the story presents Rosa's apartment and the inhabitants as a microcosm of German society in 1931; but, since Miss Porter has only three Germans, one American, and one Pole, her cast is much more limited than in *Ship of Fools*. Charles said of Rosa and the guests: 'They were all good people, they were in terrible trouble, jammed up together in this little flat with not enough air or space or money, not enough of anything, no place to go, nothing to do but gnaw each other.' Charles had the best room and paid the most rent because all Americans were thought to be rich. He was, because of this mythic wealth, protected from Rosa's sharp tongue.

Her favorite in the house was Hans von Gehring (the name reminds one of Hermann Goering), the aristocratic-looking young man, a student at Heidelberg, where he had fought a duel and was not receiving treatment for his infected wound. Charles wanted to like the young man, but he was unable to comprehend a society which approved such barbaric acts. Charles rejected the wound and everything that allowed it to be possible, even though he had seen the antique dueling pistols of his great-grandfather. Hans was proud of his scar, often fingered it; and Charles saw in the young man's face his true nature: 'amazing arrogance, pleasure, inexpressible vanity, and self-satisfaction.

Rosa's scapegoat was Herr Otto Bussen, a Platt Deutsch, whose inferior social station and poverty gave Rosa license to intimidate and demean him at every opportunity. That he was a brilliant student at the university made no difference to Frau Reichl. When Herr Bussen poisoned himself, accidentally or otherwise, she was as concerned about her rugs as about his health. The other lodger was Tadeusz Mey, a Polish-Austrian pianist and a cosmopolitan at home in London and Paris, who was living in Berlin because there was a good teacher there. Mey was constantly aware of the evils in society and was opposing them, but he was cynical enough to study and live in the corrupt German society. He and Charles were the only ones in the apartment with insight into the society, but Charles was the only one with a ready escape: he could always return to his own country.

In his sleep, Charles's premonitions about the society, as personified by the house and its inhabitants, could not be put aside. The house was burning, pulsing with fire. Charles walked from the building with all the paintings he would ever do in his life. When he turned to look back at the burning house, he thought at first that they had all escaped; but he heard a ghostly groan...and saw not a person. Symbolically, then, Charles knew that he would and could walk away from the society which was destroying itself and its members. His artistic creations were more important to him than any attempt to save the unsavable, to save those who, we must assume, would misunderstand his act and turn on him ferociously. Charles did not even reflect on his dream when he awoke, stifling in the feather coverlets; he did not know exactly what it meant; and he did not think of it when he considered giving an extra coat to Herr Bussen, an act which Mey said would be a great mistake.

The next section of the story moves from Rosa's to a newly opened, middle-class bar where the young men go to celebrate the New Year. In many ways, the section confirms Tadeusz's view that losing the war damaged the 'nation's personality,' but it goes beyond that to try to search for personality traits which were established long before the war. At the night club, Charles saw another sampling of German society: Lutte,

the thin, blonde model, a perfect German type to Hans; the large barmaid, attractive to Herr Bussen; two movie stars; and a large crowd of noisy, sentimental revelers. During the conversation, race was much discussed; and fat Otto, aspiring intellectual, insisted that 'the true great old Germanic type is lean and tall and fair as gods.'

The conversation then swirled into a long discussion of races and cultures, and Charles, who, like Miranda, had rejected the mythic views of a 'splendid past' which his parents had taught him, could not compete in the conversation since he knew almost no history. Drawn into the gaiety of the night, he danced with Lutte, but found she was interested in him only if he could get her to Hollywood. She soon turned her attention to the more aristocratic Hans. Tadeusz spoke of his family, which had lived in the same house for eight centuries, of the stifling society of his childhood, of the anti-semitic attitudes implicit in the religious dogma; his memories of the past were mixed, 'something between a cemetery and a Lost Paradise.' Otto, who grew up in a Lutheran family, spoke of his dismal childhood, of building his life on a romantic view of Luther, apparently willing to follow anyone who had become great.

At midnight, a wooden cuckoo announced the New Year; and, after the toast (nobody had been aware of the irony of the cuckoo), a 'disordered circle formed'; and there was much singing and drunken revelry until 'the circle broke up, ran together, whirled, loosened, fell apart.' The tourists' Germany could not last, and the young men had to get the drunken Otto home. Otto—symbolically, his befuddled moribund state was that of the intellectual—was carried past Rosa, who looked at her young men fondly. Charles in his drunken state, saw (or thought he saw) the Leaning Tower, now repaired, behind the glass door of the cabinet; and, though he could not quite understand why, he knew he wanted to crush the frail, useless thing. The meaning of the tower tried to break into his consciousness but could not; he felt a 'dislocation of the spirit' because he was beginning to see that the society was going to fall, that it would involve him, and that there was nothing he would do. He did not feel sorry for himself, but he did know that 'no crying jag or any other kind of jag would ever, in this world, do anything at all for him.'

The story has many brilliantly conceived scenes... Charles has vague portents of the meaning of what he sees; in his dream, he saw that the society was facing destruction. He had learned that his initial reaction to the Germans was true: 'They were the very kind of people that Holbein, Durer and Urs Graf had drawn...their late-medieval faces full of hallucinated malice and a kind of sluggish but intense cruelty that worked its way up from their depths slowly through the layers of helpless gluttonous fat.' 'The Germans,' Miss Porter said in an interview in the March 31, 1962, *Saturday Review*, 'are against anybody and everybody, and they haven't changed a bit.' Her view cannot, I think, be dismissed as a crude anti-German one, as some have tried to do. In 'The Leaning Tower' she was engaged in a literary probing of the German problem, which contains all the material for a study of the nature and meaning of evil. Her journal entries from Germany give us an indication of what she saw; and she reported honestly in her fiction what she saw.... She has succeeded admirably. These stories...are a remarkable literary achievement. They are as subtle and perceptive as the best works of Joyce or James."

George Hendrick
Katherine Anne Porter
(Twayne 1965) 111-17

"If the tower is too blatant a symbol, it is curious that critics cannot agree on what it symbolizes. If it all-too-clearly represents for Nance 'the precarious German culture, once nearly destroyed by a crude America,' it all-too-clearly represents for West 'the futile attempts of man to hold onto memories and dreams....' Mooney sees the tower as embodying the 'social and political evil' of Nazism. Kendrick sees the tower as 'a fitting symbol of a society soon to topple again,' thus disagreeing with Nance insofar as 'society' and 'culture' are not at all synonymous. It would seem, then, that the symbol is actually mysterious enough to suit even Nance if he only knew it, but in fact the 'aura of mystery' surrounding any given symbol can never be dense enough for some critics who rely on it to keep literature up for grabs.

In any case, I think it can probably be demonstrated that an interpretation of 'The Leaning Tower' depends no more on its symbolism (employed effectively enough in my view) than does an interpretation of 'Flowering Judas.' The tower symbol...means everything Miss Porter decently says it does and, because it is a symbol, it means something more.... It is through Charles Upton's experience of Rosa Reichl's

Germany that we have any sense of the symbol at all... Upton is not an 'inadequate' consciousness but inadequate only enough to permit the reader to participate in the experience of Charles's side without losing patience with his limitations.... A very inexperienced young man, Charles Upton is, in his artist's view of the world, a male version of Miranda who in turn...is a persona for the author herself....

'He felt young, ignorant, he had so much to learn he hardly knew where to begin'.... An ineffectual kind of ambassador by circumstance of youth, he is also, however, a pictorial artist by profession. As the latter, he is nothing if not a sharply focused eye. If he is also an American and therefore subject to hurt feelings and disappointment in defeated post-World War I Germany, he is as well Miss Porter's means of getting a perspective on her own German experience several years after it. There is much that Charles cannot understand, but...the story is...more about what he does understand, which is altogether in the realm of feeling and, in the light of history, monumental: first, 'a most awful premonition of disaster' and, then, 'what he had never known before, an infernal desolation of the spirit, the chill and knowledge of death in him.' He is, at the last, a good deal less a naïve boy from Texas and more a man of a world about to go up in flames in his sure knowledge, instinctively inferred, that he can do nothing about the awful imminent future. His inferences are objectified in the view of Germany in caricature with which the author provides him...a distortion and exaggeration in the interest of some truth....

Charles can sound downright boobish as when, sitting around with his 'friends' discussing the possibility of another world war, he says, '...good old sea power. I bet on that. It wins in the long run.' Charles knows as little about history as he knows about life, and even less, of course, about what the war on which he is so fatuously speculating will mean to other human beings.... It is...what he feels that gives his mind its authority for the reader. It is what he sees and the way he sees it in its graphic peculiarity.... We know that Charles Upton will one day be as good a pictorial artist as Miss Porter is a writer because his way of seeing Germany in its strikingly figurative grotesqueness is hers, insisted on in 'The Leaning Tower' and repeated in *Ship of Fools*. The purest anger with which Charles sees his Germans and the near-viciousness with which he represents them in his sketchbook bespeak a callow and uncertain young man taking the hostile way of the world personally; but his hard core is as decent as his eye is keen, and in this latter day we can see his position as frightfully dangerous, his fear as therefore justified, and his juvenile malice natural to a creature truly threatened by death.

Charles is introduced to us as a young man of a self-generating romantic disposition. His boyhood friend, who had visited Germany often, had only said that the streets of Berlin were 'polished like a table top,' but 'Charles saw it as a great shimmering city of castles towering in misty light.' He was later to wonder in bitterness how he had 'got such an image.' The image would change drastically from the medieval heroic to the contemporary swinish.... Miss Porter's habit of allegorizing evil as a pig-like German who has become a caricature of himself has in it a measure of simple xenophobia as well as a larger measure of artistic felicity, but it serves in 'The Leaning Tower' less to limn German nature than to depict human nature at its worst, when its worst manifests itself in brutality and self-pity as the consequence of hardship. Charles Upton can always go home. The Germans *are* home, and home is a battered, demoralized land of the hungry and the hysterical....

In his naïve way the American must reject the German, and the German in his own way has earned the rejection. As artist, Charles needs...to go home and grow up. Growing up means to see and accept in sadness the world as it appallingly is.... All premonitions are unreasonable, including those which tell us truthfully to run for our lives. 'It cannot be replaced,' says the landlady when Charles destroys her small plaster replica of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Charles is humiliated, and his impulse is to leave this setting forever.... In this scene, where Charles Upton is seen for everything he is—young, American, artist, anathema to the superior German, puzzled, intimidated and homesick—the much worried symbol gets Miss Porter's most careful and extended treatment. It seems less a symbol in the sense of sign-as-metaphor to make concrete some universal abstraction than a way of making vivid, as a grace note, the identity of Charles Upton who should have left on the spot but could not.

'The Leaning Tower,' no less than *Ship of Fools*, is painful to read because of its subject. It is nonetheless a joy to see Miss Porter at once containing and illuminating her anger and her disappointment at 'this majestic and terrible failure of the life of man in the Western world'."

M. M. Liberman
Katherine Anne Porter's Fiction
(Wayne State 1971) 95-103

“The American art student Charles Upton, a kind of inferior, male Miranda, is finally of too tender a moral sensibility to perfect the gift for caricature that his first few days in Berlin had started to nourish. When Upton helps to prevent a suicide attempt by a German medical student, a fellow tenant at his rooming house, who has been a favorite subject for caricature, he is dismayed to find that his humanitarian act only encourages the Germans in their anti-American resentment of him. But to carry off convincingly the anguished self-examination that he then undertakes, Charles needs to be a little more intelligent... The story's intricately contrived symbolism suggests an allegory of fascism that might have been a preliminary exercise for *Ship of Fools*.”

John Edward Hardy
Katherine Anne Porter
(Ungar 1973) 113

“As she listened to the radio accounts of events in Europe...her thoughts turned...to her months in Berlin in 1931... The Berlin story was not narrowly personal and, since it dealt with the menace of the Nazi party, she felt that it was a contribution to the war effort.... In depicting the boarders of Rosa Reichl's pension she did not change the names but modified the characters, often grafting onto them traits of people she had known elsewhere. Rosa, whom she had really liked, she turned into an unpleasant character... making her barely able to mask her hatred for the American whose rich country she believes responsible for the poverty of her own.... For the military gentleman she did not see, she used the character of Hermann Goering....[using] the Nietzschean views she had heard him express....

Here the symbolic structure developed from the cheap souvenir of the Leaning Tower of Pisa which Eugene Pressly [her husband at the time] had crumpled in his hand as they looked at pensions in Berlin. On its simplest level it is a tawdry tourist souvenir, as fragile and insubstantial as the dreams of paradise of all the characters. The history of the original is more significant. The Leaning Tower of Pisa, built in the fourteenth century as a bell tower, is an ornate and impressive structure in white marble, a substance notable for its sturdiness. The sturdiness, however, does not extend to the foundations, for a weakness there caused it to settle and lean. It cannot be used as a bell tower and must receive injections of cement to prevent its collapse. Thus it suggests the Germany that Porter saw, so apparently solid and substantial, and yet undermined by a basic flaw in its foundations.

The Leaning Tower, furthermore, has sinister overtones from its association with Canto XXXIII of *The Inferno*, in which Dante meets the traitors to their own country. The central figure here is Ugolino of Pisa, who conspired with an enemy party of that city to defeat a rival faction within his own Guelph party. His treachery merely served to weaken his own party, so that he found himself at the mercy of the very enemy with whom he had conspired. He was imprisoned with his children and grandchildren in a tower (not the Leaning Tower, although the story is closely connected with Pisa through Ugolino's imprecation against that city), and the keys were thrown away so that he was forced to watch his children and grandchildren die of hunger before he himself starved to death. Although critics disagree about the meaning of Ugolino's statement that after the death of his children hunger had more power than grief, a frequent conclusion has been that Ugolino resorted to cannibalism. If the Italian does not entirely justify this interpretation, the fact that Ugolino in hell is feeding upon the skull of his enemy suggests that Dante saw such activity as the appropriate fate for those who hope to advance themselves by destroying their own kind and kin.

The account of the chance-gathered occupants of Rosa Reichl's pension, all wanderers or defectors from their native lands, is full of images from the Ugolino story. The claustrophobic atmosphere of the pension in which they are all shut up, waiting for disaster and with no means of escape (only for Charles Upton is a ship coming from America), is conveyed in images of imprisonment, starvation, cannibalism, death, and hell. The Leaning Tower of Pisa has always been associated with Galileo because of his birth in that city. One legend has him dropping weights from the tower. Since the story of Galileo evokes and dramatizes the dilemma of the clear-sighted man in a misguided society, it is relevant to the predicament of the man of vision in Nazi Germany.... While one cynical artist retreats into the romantic music of Chopin, Charles

Upton does not see his art as a refuge of a retreat. He sees very clearly what is going on around him, does not deceive himself, and records the ghastly caricatures of human beings that he sees.”

Joan Givner
Katherine Anne Porter: A Life
(Simon and Schuster 1982) 319-22

“‘The Leaning Tower’ (1941) is set in Berlin at the time Porter lived there in 1931-32, and in the story she used many people she knew and events she witnessed or experienced. For instance when she and [Eugene] Pressly were looking over a pension, Pressly touched a fragile replica of the Leaning Tower of Pisa and it crumbled. As [Joan Givner] notes, Porter then lashed out at him: ‘Why must you touch things? Why must you always touch and destroy things?’ Porter herself appears as the central character Charles Upton, and his friend Kuno is based on her childhood friend Erna Schlemmer. One can properly ask why Porter assumed the persona of a male. Givner thinks it ‘possibly reflects her identification with Eugene Pressly during the Berlin period.’

Many of the characters in the story are named for people Porter met in Berlin, but with their characteristics sometimes changed. For instance, she rather liked her own landlady, but Rosa Reichl in the story becomes a disagreeable tyrant. In other instances, Porter seems to have used characteristics of other people she had known, as in the character as Tadeusz Mey who takes on fragments from the life of Joseph Retinger, one of Porter’s lovers in Mexico during the early 1920s. Some journal notes Porter made in December 1931 are also useful for understanding the background of her story. A young poet she knew in Berlin objected that she should not bother reading Rilke’s *Elegies*: ‘He belongs to the old romantic softheaded Germany that has been our ruin. The new Germany is hard, strong, we will have a new race of poets, tough and quick, like your prize fighters.’ The poet gave Porter some of his poems, and she found that the ‘words were tough and the rhythms harsh, the ideas all the most grossly brutal; and yet, it was vague weak stuff in the end.’

In another note she describes a conversation with I. [unidentified] and von G. [Goring] about Nietzsche: ‘Nietzsche is dangerous because his mind has power without intelligence; he is all will without enlightenment. His phrases are inflated, full of violence, a gross kind of cruel poetry—like Wagner’s music. They both throw a hypnotic influence over their hearers. But I could always resist hypnotists. When I think of Nietzsche and Wagner...I find charlatans.... And madness. In Nietzsche’s case...his diseased brain gave his style the brilliance of a rotting fish. L. and G. worship them both with a religious awe.’ In 1941 she captured...much of the spirit of that impression and rumination of 1931.”

Willene Hendrick and George Hendrick
“Art and Malignity in Porter’s ‘The Leaning Tower’”
Katherine Anne Porter
(Twayne 1988) 90-96

“The events in ‘The Leaning Tower’ are confined to five days in Berlin, where Charles Upton, a young American artist is absorbing impressions about Germany and the society represented by the boardinghouse in which he lives.... Charles is traveling toward truth, but he arrives only halfway. At the end of the story, Charles’s drunkenness produces the kind of delirium that is similar to a dream, and in this state an elusive truth hovers about him.... Like Miranda, he will have to wait until memory and time transform the adventure into experience....

It is too simplistic to see the plaster tower as the symbol for Nazi Germany, whose fragility will surely lead to its disintegration.... For [Rosa] it represents an ideal place and time to which she longs to return. All the other characters have cherished illusions. For Hans, the Heidelberg student with the ugly dueling scar, it is the romantic past of Germany, or Paris as a substitute; for Tadeuz Mey, a young cynical Polish pianist, it is London; for Otto Bussen, a starving mathematics student, it is death or a cabaret; for the barber it is Malaga; for Charles’s father, it was Mexico... For Charles himself it has been Berlin, an image created by his friend Kuno.... Because of Kuno, Charles has come to Berlin naively expecting to find his ideal. Instead, he sees starvation, misery, dullness, fanaticism... The plaster tower, which Charles accidentally breaks, represents all their illusions....

A dream Charles has links the house of Germany to the plaster tower. Charles dreams the house is burning down... 'tall as a tower standing in a fountain of fire.' One of the themes of 'The Leaning Tower' is the illusion of idealism and the great disparity between appearance and reality. Rosa, by mending the tower and replacing its former position of honor, indicates that for her the self-delusion was still thriving in 1931.... Another symbol in the story, a dozen infant-sized pottery cupids that adorn the roof of a house across the street from Charles's boardinghouse, also helps to explain the leaning tower.... In the final paragraph of the story, when Charles is contemplating the mended tower and wondering about its meaning, he connects it with the cupids: "Leaning, suspended, perpetually ready to fall but never falling quite..."

The tower comes to symbolize death... The plaster tower and the pottery cupids are dead ideas fixed in time... [The] last section builds upon the first two sections and clarifies the universal meaning of this story, which has been erroneously construed as only a statement about Germany.... Tadeuz Mey, the Polish piano student... explains international relations.... 'The whole art of self-importance is to raise your personal likes and dislikes to the plane of moral or aesthetic principle, and to apply on an international scale your smallest personal experience'... Charles senses that the present contention among nations is merely the most recent segment in an ancient continuum of wars....

Charles perceives the destructive will to power within the human race, and it is this impending death of another era of civilization he feels as much as the seed of death within himself. The meaning of the fragile and foolish plaster tower, treasured and protected by Rosa and all the people who live by illusions, is extended to include far more than an ideal or the German state. It represents civilization itself. Throughout all three parts Porter uses images and symbols to create an atmosphere of death, the most notable of which are...whiteness, snow, and cold. She works into all sections reminders of the essential causes of battles.... The inflation, poverty, and class disparity depicted in Berlin have led to greed, avarice, and cruelty, all human failings revealed in Porter's brilliant description of the pig-worshippers, obese Berliners who gaze longingly at pork products and artificial pigs....

The final theme in the story is a subtle statement about art and the artist's role in society.... What begins in hatred and revulsion grows into tenderness as [Charles] works, and through the exercise of his artistic craft Charles concludes that they are all 'good people' who are merely in 'terrible trouble.' Porter implies that art has the potential to redeem humanity through love. At the end of the story, however, it seems clear that the potential will not be realized....Porter's ironic point of view, the cynical perspective of the author's voice superimposed over the limited awareness of the protagonist, makes a larger insight possible for the reader."

Darlene Harbour Unrue
Understanding Katherine Anne Porter
(U South Carolina 1988) 112-19

"'The Leaning Tower' is a story very much in the Jamesian tradition, depicting the American in Europe. But the story as Porter presents it is quite different from anything that Henry James could have managed. Porter never lets us forget that her narrative concerns a *Texan* in Berlin; and his moral sense is judged to be superior...to that of the Germans.... The setting is Berlin of 1931, the capital of a nation defeated in World War I; a nation whining over its defeat, now in the throes of a desperate financial inflation, unemployment, poverty, grimly accepting a steadily more menacing police state, greedy for the essentials of life, steadily preparing for the next war, ripe for a messiah.... When Charles Upton...goes into a barbershop to have his hair styled, he sees a photograph of 'a little shouting politician, top lock on end, wide-stretched mouth adorned by a square mustache, who had, apparently, made the style popular.' Adolph Hitler, style setter, is thus put in his place with consummate Porterian irony.

The central symbol of the story, the plaster model of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, functions on many levels but chiefly to illustrate the precarious state of Western civilization; at any moment it can come crashing down all around us. Human relationships, likewise, crumble at the slightest sign of strain.... Distrust reigns everywhere. Human life, symbolized by the many images of animals and animal life, has become degraded and something less than truly human.... Snarling cruelty threatens him everywhere he goes. As a foreigner, he is under constant suspicion; and in every way he is exploited by the Germans. Anti-Semitism is rampant....

The implication is that Charles Upton is somewhat 'urbane'... Kuno, who had died at the age of fifteen on a visit to Berlin, is ever on his mind.... Kuno, of German descent, was a gifted violinist; but German art and culture are seen now to be in decay.... The Texas Germans, according to Upton's memory, were not at all like the Germans who now mistreat him so casually.... Throughout the story, the implied as well as the explicit contrast is that between Texas and Berlin.... Kuno...is a 'sacrificial' character; the dead Kuno can now function as a symbol of 'the old order' in Germany, an order being replaced by a colossal war machine. The old Germany is dead; the threatening new Germany is rising.... Berlin is chiefly hateful, Charles Upton thinks, because of the piggish faces, piggish notions, pig-like characteristics of all sorts....Thomas Mann's short story 'Mario and the Magician' (1929), a study of Italy's falling under the spell of an oppressive fascism [is] a possible influence upon 'The Leaning Tower,' whose title is suggestive of Italian influences....

It is indeed the oppressive *atmosphere* that dominates this story, the sense of uneasiness; the fear of being stopped by the police, of calling attention to oneself in any way whatsoever; in short, the brutalized, animalized atmosphere of the police state."

James T. F. Tanner
The Texas Legacy of Katherine Anne Porter
(U North Texas 1991) 168-73

"Tadeusz Mey, the Polish pianist of 'The Leaning Tower,' might be expressing the sentiments of a number of Porter characters when he tells Charles Upton, 'If someone steps on your foot, you should not rest until you have raised an army to avenge you'."

Debra A. Modellmog
"Concepts of Justice in the Work of Katherine Anne Porter"
Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature 26.4 (Fall 1993) 37-52

"The story is set in Germany in 1931, a time when the country was beset with deep economic depression and when Hitler and his National Socialist party were making great strides in popularity and power. While Hitler would not gain the chancellorship until 1933, aspects of totalitarianism were already taking hold in Germany, with Hitler wielding power and influence with his party's platform emphasizing German nationalism and anti-Semitism. Hitler's paramilitary organization, the Sturmabteilungen (SA), was also then quite active, not only in marching through the streets and holding rallies but also in engaging in street battles with opponents of Hitler, particularly the Communists....

The influence of Nazi thinking pervades the Berlin of 'The Leaning Tower,' even though neither Hitler nor the SA has an obvious presence. Upton sees the powerful appeal of the Hitler mystique—Hitler's 'authority of personality'—when he goes to get a haircut.... The Hitler cut...was fast becoming the obligatory style. 'His own was cut that way,' the narrator observes of the barber, 'the streets were full of such heads'... Only prolonged resistance to the barber's wishes gets Upton the haircut he wants, the entire episode indicating the power of the Hitler cult and its demands for conformity.

In his conversation with his fellow roomers at Rosa's boardinghouse, Upton comes face-to-face with the rigid racial bias—the 'blood' in Hitler's speeches—underlying German nationalism and cementing Nazi ideology. Hans and Otto, two German boarders, rarely miss an opportunity to praise what they claim are the glories of the Germanic race, and they are always quick to defend the race from criticism....'the true great old Germanic type is lean and tall and fair as gods'... No other race measures up to their own. They time and again characterize various nationalities with degrading stereotypes that underscore their differences from the Germanic paragon.... The French are 'a race of monkeys'... Underlying such thinking is of course pride in racial purity, the desire to protect it, and the consequent distrust of outsiders. After Otto concludes that Charles is decadently rich, he eyes him 'from head to foot as if he were some improbable faintly repellent creature of another species'....

In "The Leaning Tower,' the Germanic 'fighting spirit' manifests itself as the desire to fight for world domination, seen most forcefully in the comments of Hans. Hans's ideas on foreign policy are quite simple: attack before being attacked.... Hans coolly looks ahead to the next world war, saying that unlike what

happened in World War I, Germany will make no errors this time.... 'Power, pure power, is what counts to a nation or a race.... Power is the only thing of any value or importance in this world'."

Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr.
Katherine Anne Porter's Artistic Development
(Louisiana State 1993) 211-13

"Charles Upton...has arrived [in Berlin] nearly three months later than Porter herself actually arrived...to move the entire action fully into a winter setting. Her own impressions of Berlin were dominated by cold and gloom. In 'The Leaning Tower' she emphasizes these qualities, making them into symbols of the living death of Germany between the wars, its national face set toward the absolute death of Hitler and Nazism.... 'The Leaning Tower' both generalizes and intensifies the disillusionment that had overtaken Porter in Mexico. There she had seen her political hopes wane and her admiration for many of Mexico's leaders turn to distaste for their venality. Corruption in office, she believed, pervaded the Mexican system of government and made it, not the fulfillment, but the betrayal of the Revolution. In Germany, where she had hoped to see a more mature culture, alive with the ferment of a better-schooled communism, she saw much the same, a society in turmoil with the ordinary people paying the price.

On New Year's Day, 1932, she wrote to Yvor Winters that she had thought Hitler was 'rather a bad joke' until she got to Germany and observed matters at first hand, but now took him seriously and feared he might 'turn out to be a very bad bargain.' Giving up...her notion of going on to Russia, she settled into a fusty boardinghouse, after Pressly went on to Madrid to find a job... It was during this period of extreme frustration, loneliness, and gloom that she fell into the deep depression that she referred to as a nervous breakdown. The conditions that beset Porter during these cold months of late 1931 and early 1932 are recreated in 'The Leaning Tower'.... For Upton as for Porter, it is impossible to pursue an artistic vocation in such surroundings.... If Upton manages to shake off his gloomy sense of pity, he falls into a mood of hatred in which he sees the German people as grotesque animals. And so he draws them, primarily as pigs, employing techniques of caricature like those with which Porter had become familiar during her years of acquaintance with Miguel Covarrubias and other caricaturists in Mexico.

Beneath the economic misery of the people lies the incipient Nazism soon to overwhelm the entire society. At first Upton is aware of Hitler only as a grotesque, slightly comical demagogue.... He does not see the image of the rising dictator as an exemplar, as the barber does... He views him as a caricature. Later in the story, however, when Upton goes out to celebrate New Year's Eve with his fellow roomers in the pension, he comes to realize the seriousness of the demagogue's spell, which...merely focuses the underlying mentality of a people whose better qualities are distorted and perverted by their misery and resentment.... Upton's German comrades reveal their ethnic pride and willingness to stereotype other national groups, their militarism, and their determination to avenge themselves for their defeat in the first World War by launching a second. Hans, who is enduring the discomfort of an infected dueling scar that will become his mark of pride in the old Prussian tradition, brags that 'power is the only thing of any value or importance in this world'.... Even the gentlest and most sympathetic of them, a mathematics professor named Herr Bussen, becomes sly and resentful when he finds himself beholden to anyone...and his pride will not tolerate [charity]. It is the German pride that will propel the world into another war....

The tower of pride and resentment being so painstakingly constructed by the Germans is, after all, unstable. It leans.... The leaning tower that is the flawed German system will crumble in the hand of the American. It is an elusively complex but convincing symbol of an entire society. Once again, as in 'Hacienda,' Porter found an aesthetically and intellectually satisfying concrete representation of a social and political whole.... It must be regarded as a major work... As a piece of political commentary it is richly suggestive. So keen a critic as Glenway Wescott regarded it as being 'not only all right' but 'rather godlike'.... I envy her having written this'."

Janis P. Stout
Katherine Anne Porter: A Sense of the Times
(U Virginia 1995) 111-14

“Porter...met Goering at a dinner party... [She later] denounced [Robert Penn] Warren’s portrayal of the Long-like Willie Stark as ‘a sentimental apology for the worst sort of Fascist demagogue.’ [*All the King’s Men*, 1946] In “The Leaning Tower” [1941] Porter herself [had] explored what might have driven a dispirited Germany to follow such a rabble-rouser. And she gave a southern resonance to Charles Upton’s sojourn by making the Aryan dedication to violent honor recall similar ideals from the Texas of his family past. Porter found in Germany what Thomas Wolfe detected there as well, a ‘plague of the spirit’.”

Gary M. Ciuba
Desire, Violence & Divinity in Modern Southern Fiction
(Louisiana State 2007) 223

“The Leaning Tower” (1941) is most important as a prelude and supplement to *Ship of Fools* (1962), the last great masterpiece of Modernism—a landmark in literary history. These works are uniquely valuable as the only in-depth analyses in American literature of the causes of World War II and the rise of Nazism. Porter was even an eyewitness, living in Berlin in 1931-32. Nearly all the critics of Porter are liberals who were not there and who underestimate these works because liberals deny their own collusion with evil, in particular their own current totalitarianism as established in Political Correctness, the academic police state. Today in fact, academic liberals are often compared to Nazis. The ivory towers of academe are leaning so far to the left they cannot be supported anymore.

Porter exposes psychological traits that led to Nazism and the war: extreme German nationalism, ethnic pride, a lust for revenge after the first world war, and a romantic tradition of exalting violence symbolized by infected dueling scars. A television series called *Babylon Berlin* (2017) begins in 1929, just two years before her story is set. Both she and the series depict most Germans as good people trapped in a terrible situation. The series dramatizes shocking poverty, debauchery, brutality, social chaos, and a pervasive longing for death. One cause of Nazism was the invasion of Germany by Russian Communists—Stalinists, Leninists, Trotskyites, and other leftist factions at war against each other as well as against the German government. Revolutionaries and fascists were killing each other all over the place. Every person in Berlin was in danger of being murdered. Americans have not been well educated because liberals have been sympathetic to Communism as a naïve ideal, especially in higher education, New York and Hollywood. Many became disillusioned when Stalin formed a pact with Hitler in 1939, yet many liberals continue to identify with leftist violence, especially attacks on white supremacists.

The earliest critics of “The Leaning Tower” were guardians of traditional Realism who faulted Porter for greatly enhancing her Realism with techniques of Modernism, including caricature and allegory. To be consistent they would have to make the same criticisms of Joyce, Mann, Faulkner, and other Modernists. The most conspicuous limitation of Realist critics is their inability to appreciate the symbol of the leaning tower of Pisa, as perfect a complex trope as those in the Metaphysical poetry of John Donne, an allegorical image with details corresponding to a number of historical facts, literary backgrounds, and moral ideas, as summarized in 1982 by Joan Givner, Porter’s biographer. Additional allusions include that to the towers in “The Waste Land” (1922) by T. S. Eliot: “And upside down in air were towers”... By implication “The Leaning Tower” accurately predicts the coming destruction of Germany.

The critics failed again to discern the religious vision of Porter. The tower of Babel in the Bible is a symbol of pride in disregard of God. In response, God divided the corrupt human race into groups and scattered them all over the world with different languages that made it impossible for them to understand each other. The different languages spoken in the boardinghouse, the discussion of languages by Tadeusz, the difficulty Charles has in fully understanding German, and the misunderstandings of other races and nations—especially America—by all the characters as evident in prejudices and stereotyping, together allude in effect to the tower of Babel. This makes “the leaning tower” a symbol not just of Germany but of the whole world in a story published at a time (1941) when world civilization was in danger of destruction by the second world war. Nobody knew how this war would end. The Nazis might win.

World War II was motivated above all by German pride in disregard of God. Berlin is another Babel. Germans give lip service to God but want His power—as did Lucifer—believing as Hans proclaims that “power is the only thing of any value or importance in this world.” Worship of God has been replaced by

“pig worship.” Germans designed Berlin beyond human scale to outdo the Romans and glorify themselves as godlike. Porter contrasts their Romanticism with reality by noting ironically that Germans are not proud of their own capital city and would rather live elsewhere. They do not aspire to the City of God, they yearn for idealized man-made cities outside Germany—Pisa, Malaga, Paris, and London.

When Charles gets jealous of Hans over the beautiful Lutte, he feels a flash of hatred and exclaims, “Hell,” linking pride with envy, hatred, lust and greed. Charles will be able to return to America, but the story ends with him feeling like hell in Berlin, with an “infernal desolation of the spirit.” Tadeusz suggests that the boardinghouse is a “damnation jail” and adds that “all Berlin is just that.” The suicidal Herr Bussen is called a “poor devil,” Hans says his infected dueling scar “gives me the devil” and he is a personification of the German will-to-war when Tadeusz asks “Is the damnation dueler raising hell again?” Hitler is the Satan leading Germans to hell in this world and the next. Porter makes her religious vision emphatic at the end of her story with three successive affirmations of God ironically uttered as merely conventional expressions—“God bless you,” “for God’s sake,” and “thank God.”

The Realist critics who complained that the tower is “too obvious” a symbol appear unfamiliar with all the literary classics that explicate their central symbols at length, including—to cite only a few American examples: “The Maypole of Merry Mount,” “The Minister’s Black Veil,” “The Birthmark,” *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby-Dick*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, “The Open Boat,” *The Golden Bowl*, “The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” *The Bear*. Furthermore, as M. M. Liberman pointed out, “If the tower is too blatant a symbol, it is curious that critics cannot agree on what it symbolizes.”

Most critics have classified “The Leaning Tower” as a short novel (or novella) based on its length alone, which is slightly longer than each of the three short novels under the title *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*. However, considered according to the criteria of content, each of the three short novels is exceptionally compressed and rich enough in material—settings, characters, themes, plot, subplots—to extend into a novel twice as long or more, whereas “The Leaning Tower” is simpler in content, a long story that could not be made any longer without weakening its force.

Michael Hollister (2018)