

ORDER, FORM AND STATEMENT  
IN KATHERINE ANNE PORTER'S SHIP OF FOOLS

by

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. . . This present Boke myght haue ben callyd nat inconueniently the Satyr (that is to say) the reprehencion of foullysshnes, but the neweltye of the name was more plesant vnto the fyrst actour to call it the Shyp of folcs: For in lyke wyse as olde Poetes Satyriens in dyuers Poesyes conioyned repreued the synnes and ylnes of the peple at that tyme lyuyng: so and in lyke wyse this our Boke representeth vnto the iyen of the redars the states and condicions of men: so that euery man may behold within the same the cours of his lyfe and his mys gouerned maners, as he sholde beholde the shadowe of the fygure of his visage within a bright Myrrour. . . .

--Alexander Barclay in the "Argument"  
to his translation of Brant's Ship  
of Fools, 1509.

When her first novel, Ship of Fools, was published in late March of 1962, Katherine Anne Porter had completed a project that had occupied her, off and on, for thirty years; for it was in August of 1931 that she made the ocean voyage from Mexico to Germany which gave her the setting and, no doubt, many of the prototypes for characters for a story that grew and grew until it turned into a full-length novel. The whole project originated with observations about her fellow passengers which she jotted down in a diary; from there, as she herself describes the process, "little by little it began to turn itself into a story, by that mysterious process which I cannot explain, but which I recognize when it begins, and I go along with it out of a kind of curiosity, as if my mind which knows the facts is watching to see what my story-telling mind will finally make of them."<sup>1</sup> She had hoped to fit the story into her volume of short novels, Pale Horse, Pale Rider; but apparently another mysterious process took place, for when she had finished about fifty pages she realized that she "would have to change the original structure."<sup>2</sup>

The many delays in the novel's publication have given rise to a kind of legend about it, that Miss Porter has been either slaving away

<sup>1</sup>In an editor's note introducing an excerpt from the novel in Atlantic, CXCII (March 1956), 33.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Elizabeth Janeway, "For Katherine Anne Porter, 'Ship of Fools' Was a Lively Twenty-Two Year Voyage," New York Times Book Review, April 1, 1962, p. 5.

at it steadily all those years or wasting her time when she should have been living up to her promise that a novel was forthcoming. She denies she was doing either, saying, "I wasn't working on it all that time. It was working on me. And I did publish other books in those years--stories, essays, and translations. But to hear people talk, you'd think I'd just been sitting around and counting my toes."<sup>3</sup> Certainly it was during these years that she published all her significant fiction, consisting of three volumes of collected stories and short novels and two other recent stories in magazines. The volumes are: Flowering Judas and Other Stories (1935),<sup>4</sup> consisting of the stories "Maria Concepcion," "Magic," "Rope," "He," "Theft," "That Tree," "The Cracked Looking-Glass," "Flowering Judas," "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall," and "Hacienda"; Pale Horse, Pale Rider (1939), consisting of "Old Mortality," "Noon Wine," and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider"; and The Leaning Tower and Other Stories (1944), consisting of "The Source," "The Witness," "The Circus," "The Old Order," "The Last Leaf," "The Grave," "The Downward Path to Wisdom," "A Day's Work," and "The Leaning Tower." The other two stories are "Fig Tree," published in Harper's<sup>5</sup> and "Holiday," published in Atlantic,<sup>6</sup> both in 1960. It is on these works and on the novel that her literary reputation is based. Most of her critical essays and opinions on the craft of writing have been gathered in a single volume, The Days Before (1952), and she has two volumes of

<sup>3</sup>Quoted in Cleveland Amory, "Celebrity Register," McCall's, XC (April 1963), 184.

<sup>4</sup>This is the revised edition; the first edition of Flowering Judas appeared in 1930 and contained only "Maria Concepcion," "Magic," "Rope," "He," "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall," and "Flowering Judas."

<sup>5</sup>CCXI (June 1960), 55-59.

<sup>6</sup>CCVI (December 1960), 44-56.

translation, the first, a collection of seventeen songs from the French, entitled Katherine Anne Porter's French Song Book (1935), the second, a translation of Jose Joaquin Fernandez de Lizardi's The Itching Parrot (1942). In addition to all these, she began, prior to her voyage, a biography of Cotton Mather, but was forced to abandon her research for lack of funds. She is now reported to have returned to that project.<sup>7</sup> Taken together, these literary efforts support her claim that she has not been idle during the thirty years preceding the publication of her novel; even so, the total output of her fiction is relatively slight for one who enjoys such a high position in American letters today. Her own account of her small output will be discussed later.

#### I.

Katherine Anne Porter was born in a German-dominated area of eastern Texas on May 15, 1890. She is proud of the fact that she is the great-great-granddaughter of Daniel Boone.<sup>8</sup> Her family background and her early childhood are the subjects of most of her famous "Miranda" tales, and it is probable that they comprise her biography up to the time she moved to Mexico. For example, she attended a convent school in Louisiana of the same kind described in "Old Mortality."

Miss Porter has said that she could write an autobiography based on her reading until she was twenty-five.<sup>9</sup> The Texas home in which she grew up contained an extensive library; by the time she was fourteen she had read Shakespeare's sonnets, and at fifteen she read the Russian novelists and the novels of Laurence Sterne, whom she conscientiously

<sup>7</sup>"Works in Progress, 1963," Esquire, LX (July 1963), 51.

<sup>8</sup>Amory, p. 184.

<sup>9</sup>The Days Before, pp. 42-60.

imitated as part of her self-training as a writer.<sup>10</sup> At around age eighteen, however, she ran away from her confined life in Texas and Louisiana, launching a strangely nomadic life, her literary career beginning a few years later. During the first world war she lived in Denver and worked on the Rocky Mountain News; throughout the twenties she lived in Mexico, witnessing first-hand the chaos of the Mexican revolutions. It was during this same period, of course, that American writers were finding it fashionable to sojourn in Paris, gathering at the feet of Gertrude Stein. Miss Porter has certainly never missed being one of Miss Stein's disciples, as revealed in Miss Porter's essay, "The Wooden Umbrella,"<sup>11</sup> and she had a compulsion to go to Mexico. "I didn't go to Paris," she says, "because I didn't feel-- I didn't know anybody in Paris. I did feel a call to go to Mexico. And the revolutions were, in a strange sort of way, gentle when you compared them to all the other, later things. But . . . there was a kind of reality to it. So when I came back to New York and ran into bathtub gin and the F. Scott Fitzgerald crowd, I felt a bit out of place."<sup>12</sup> Thus, during her early years as a writer, Miss Porter was isolated from other literary personalities. This, she admits, prolonged her years of apprenticeship; "but," she adds, "it saved me from discipleship, personal influences, and membership in groups."<sup>13</sup> For a brief time, however, she did have contact with one notable figure of American literature,

<sup>10</sup>Margaret Marshall, "Writers in the Wilderness: III. Katherine Anne Porter," Nation, CL (April 13, 1940), 473.

<sup>11</sup>In The Days Before, pp. 42-60.

<sup>12</sup>Quoted in Amory, p. 184.

<sup>13</sup>Quoted in Marshall, p. 473.

Hart Crane, who was her house-guest for a few days and then her neighbor in Mexico City in the early spring of 1931.<sup>14</sup>

That same year, Miss Porter was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship to study in Paris, the reason for her ocean voyage in August. Her experiences in Mexico, besides depriving her of the companionship of "the F. Scott Fitzgerald crowd," provided her with settings and subject matter for some of her best stories, including "Maria Concepcion," "That Tree," "Hacienda," and the story many regard as her best, "Flowering Judas." All these stories, with the exception of "That Tree," were written before she made her European voyage.

Miss Porter spent five years in Europe, returning to America in October of 1936. She considers her years in Mexico and abroad as having a most profound influence in shaping her as an artist. She says:

. . . I had, at a time of great awareness and active energy, spent nearly fourteen years of my life out of this country: in Mexico, Bermuda, Spain, Germany, Switzerland, but, happiest and best, four years in Paris. Of my life in these places I felt then, and I feel now, that it was all entirely right, timely, appropriate, exactly where I should have been and what doing at that very time. I did not feel exactly at home; I knew where home was; but the time had come for me to see the world for myself, and so I did, almost as naturally as a bird taking off on his new wingfeathers. In Europe, things were not so strange; sometimes I had a pleasant sense of having here and there touched home base; if I was not at home, I was sometimes with friends. And all the time, I was making notes on stories--stories of my own place, my South--for my part of Texas was peopled almost entirely by Southerners from Virginia, Tennessee, the Carolinas, Kentucky, where different branches of my own family were settled, and I was almost instinctively living in a sustained state of mind and feeling, quietly and secretly, comparing one thing with another, always remembering and remembering; and all sorts of things were falling into their proper places, taking on their natural shapes and sizes, and going back and back clearly into right perspective--right for me as artist, I simply mean to say; and it was like breathing--

<sup>14</sup>George Hendrics, "Hart Crane Aboard the Ship of Fools: Some Speculations," Twentieth Century Literature, IX (April 1963), 3.

I did not have consciously to urge myself to think about it. So my time in Mexico and Europe served me in a way I had not dreamed of, even, besides its own charm and goodness; it gave me back my past and my own house and my own people--the native land of my heart.<sup>15</sup>

Her European experience served her in other ways also; for, in addition to providing her with the setting for "The Leaning Tower" and for the novel, these years and the ten years that immediately followed them comprise the most intensely productive period in her literary career. After the publication of The Leaning Tower and Other Stories in 1944, she suspended publication of fictional material until 1960, with the exception of eleven excerpts from the novel, published in a number of periodicals from 1944 to 1959.<sup>16</sup> The rest of her literary effort has been devoted to criticism and historical studies.

Miss Porter's return to America did not occasion, however, her settling herself into one fixed location in which to work. She has lived in Baton Rouge, upper New York State, southern California, and Connecticut. She is currently living in Washington, D. C.<sup>17</sup> Except for a brief period at script-writing in Hollywood, her literary career, prior to Ship of Fools, failed to make her financially independent. To supplement her income, she has taught and lectured at

<sup>15</sup>Katherine Anne Porter, "'Noon Wine': The Sources," Yale Review, XLVI (Autumn 1956), 25-26.

<sup>16</sup>These include: "Kein Haus, Keine Heimat," Sewanee Review, LII (October 1944), 465-482; "The High Sea," Partisan Review, XII (Fall 1945), 514-549; "The Strangers," Accent, VI (Summer 1946), 211-229; "Embarcation," Sewanee Review, LV (January 1947), 1-23; "The Exile," Harper's Magazine, CCI (December 1950), 70-76; "The Prisoner," Harper's Magazine, CCI (October 1950), 88-96; "Under Weigh," Harper's Magazine, CCI (November 1950), 80-88; "Ship of Fools," Atlantic, CXC VII (March 1956), 34-38; "Ship of Fools," Atlantic, CXC VII (April 1956), 56-63; "Ship of Fools," Mademoiselle, XLVII (July 1958), 26-43; "Ship of Fools," Texas Quarterly, II (Autumn 1959), 97-151.

<sup>17</sup>Glenway Wescott, "Katherine Anne Porter: The Making of A Novel," Atlantic, CCIX (April 1962), 43.

various colleges and universities; but her susceptibility to illness has often interrupted her engagements.<sup>18</sup> The popularity of Ship of Fools, published in her seventy-second year, has relieved her at last of the burden of making a living, allowing her to devote all her efforts to her art.

But if Miss Porter was so late in achieving the popular acclaim due her, she had long since received widespread acclaim from critics. The limited first edition of Flowering Judas and Other Stories drew high praise from two prominent critics. Ivor Winters stated in a 1931 issue of Hound and Horn that Miss Porter's stories were second only to one composition (unnamed) by W. C. Williams for their fineness in detail, their power, and their intelligence and maturity in outlook (Winters was speaking, of course, only of story writers then living).<sup>19</sup> Allen Tate wrote in a 1930 issue of Nation that Miss Porter "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."<sup>20</sup> The expanded second edition of that same volume also drew a good deal of praise from such reviewers as Eleanor Clark writing in New Republic and noting the "subdued and exceptional brilliance" of the style of the stories,<sup>21</sup> and Howard Baker, who wrote in his article for Southern Review, entitled

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>19</sup>"Major Fiction," Hound and Horn, IV (January 1931), 303-305. Cited in Edward Schwartz, "Katherine Anne Porter: A Critical Bibliography," Bulletin of the New York Public Library, LVII (May 1953), 240.

<sup>20</sup>"A New Star," Nation, CXXIII (October 1930), 352-353. Cited in Schwartz, p. 240.

<sup>21</sup>"Cameos," New Republic, LXXXV (December 25, 1935), 207. Cited in Schwartz, p. 239.

"The Contemporary Short Story," that Miss Porter's "peerless" social awareness "is what makes her a great writer."<sup>22</sup>

The second volume of stories, Pale Horse, Pale Rider, published in 1939, attracted wide critical acclaim. Glenway Wescott compared "Noon Wine" with Paradise Lost.<sup>23</sup> Christopher Isherwood's praise was somewhat restrained for the reason that, although he found Miss Porter's stories grave, delicate, and just, they lacked what he called the "vulgar appeal."<sup>24</sup> Ralph Thompson, writing in The New York Times, noted that "Miss Porter has been called a brilliant stylist. So she is in the sense that she produces little work and that what there is of it is well polished. But she has nothing like a 'manner' and no stylistic procosity . . . Her work . . . is of unmistakable quality, simple in pattern, substantial, honestly moving."<sup>25</sup>

These two volumes also brought recognition to Miss Porter of another kind. In addition to the Guggenheim fellowship of 1931, she was awarded the Book-of-the-Month Club Fellowship in 1937 for Flowering Judas and Other Stories and the Gold Medal of the Society for the Libraries of New York University for Pale Horse, Pale Rider in 1940.<sup>26</sup> Around this time, too, periodicals began showing interest in the author as well as in her works, as evidenced by a lengthy portrait of Miss

<sup>22</sup>III (1938), 595-596. Cited in Schwartz, p. 239.

<sup>23</sup>"Praise," Southern Review, V (1939), 161-173. Cited in Schwartz, p. 243.

<sup>24</sup>"Pale Horse, Pale Rider," New Republic, XCVIII (April 19, 1939), 312-313. Cited in Schwartz, p. 242.

<sup>25</sup>"Books of the Times," New York Times, March 30, 1939. Cited in Schwartz, p. 243.

<sup>26</sup>Schwartz, p. 236.

Porter by Margaret Marshall in the April 13, 1940, issue of Nation,<sup>27</sup> and by other portraits and features on her in Time magazine<sup>28</sup> and in The New York Times Book Review.<sup>29</sup>

It was also on the basis of the first two volumes of collected stories that critical studies and analyses of Miss Porter's work began appearing in the "little magazines" and scholarly journals. The first of these was Glenway Wescott's Southern Review article, entitled "Praise."<sup>30</sup> Two other articles that appeared prior to the publication in 1944 of The Leaning Tower and Other Stories were Lodwick Hartley's "Katherine Anne Porter" in the April-June, 1940, issue of Sewanee Review<sup>31</sup> and Robert Penn Warren's "Katherine Anne Porter (Irony with a Center)" in the Winter, 1942, issue of Kerwon Review.<sup>32</sup> Hartley begins his article by observing that, as a stylist, Miss Porter "has been mentioned in the same breath with Hawthorne, Flaubert, and Maupassant."<sup>33</sup> But, he acknowledges, her popularity, even though her stories are included more and more in anthologies, is restricted to a select group of American readers. The bulk of Hartley's article is typical of the early criticism Miss Porter's stories received. It is concerned only with her style, specifically, with her exquisite attention to detail in such stories as "The Grave" and "The Cracked Looking-Glass." In fact, Hartley claims, it is her mastery of detail that enables Miss

<sup>27</sup>Op. cit., above, note 10.

<sup>28</sup>LXXIII (April 10, 1939), 75. Cited in Schwartz, p. 243.

<sup>29</sup>"Katherine Anne Porter at Work," The New York Times Book Review, April 14, 1940, p. 20. Cited in Schwartz, p. 237.

<sup>30</sup>Op. cit., above, note 22.

<sup>31</sup>XLVIII (April-June 1940), 206-216.

<sup>32</sup>IV (Winter 1942), 29-42.

<sup>33</sup>Hartley, p. 206.

Porter to make such excellent character delineation.<sup>34</sup> He concludes:

Among her Southern contemporaries in short prose fiction Miss Porter has few peers. She lacks the social emphasis of Mr. Erskine Caldwell, but she also lacks his sensationalism. She has nothing of Mr. William Faulkner's hypnotic quality, his violent power, or his flair for abnormal psychology; but neither has she any of his obliquity. At her best she is superior as a craftsman to both. At any point in her art she is one of the most talented of living American writers.<sup>35</sup>

This is indeed high praise, especially for such a minute output as Hartley had to go on; but Hartley's is a view endorsed outright by Robert Penn Warren. "Many of her stories," Warren says, "are unsurpassed in modern fiction, and some are not often equalled. She belongs to the relatively small group of writers . . . who have done serious, consistent, original, and vital work in the form of short fiction."<sup>36</sup> Warren, however, attempts a much more penetrating analysis of Miss Porter's technique than does Hartley. After examining the style of "Flowering Judas" and the structure and themes of "Old Mortality," "Noon Wine," and "The Cracked Looking-Glass," Warren concludes that Miss Porter's consistent use of irony at the end of her stories implies "a refusal to accept the code, 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 a dialectical approach to the matters of definition, the need for exercising as much faculty as possible."<sup>37</sup> Warren's analysis

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 215.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 216.

<sup>36</sup>Warren, p. 29.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 42.

is indeed penetrating, and it applies over and over again to Ship of Fools, in which irony is often relied upon, as well as to the few stories he had to deal with. His 1942 article is one of the three or four most important contributions to Porter criticism.

The publication of The Leaning Tower and Other Stories brought on another wave of reviews and, with them, several critical analyses. Glenway Wescott's review, appropriately titled "Stories by a Writer's Writer," calls Miss Porter's style "perfection"; and, for this reason, he ranks her with Hemingway as writers who stand "head and shoulders above the rest."<sup>38</sup> Other reviewers, however, while noting the flawless style, express disappointment in the over-all quality of the latest volume. Orville Prescott says, "Although 'The Downward Path to Wisdom' and 'A Day's Work' are almost masterpieces, The Leaning Tower as a volume is not nearly so impressive as . . . the two earlier volumes."<sup>39</sup> Edward Weeks says, "One must respect the sheer virtuosity of Miss Porter's prose, which is supple and ever so carefully selected. But style without warmth . . . can be a tedious affair."<sup>40</sup> But Edmund Wilson's New Yorker review stands out for its forthright critical complaint about the perfection of Miss Porter's style, a complaint often echoed by subsequent critics. Wilson says:

. . . To the reviewer, Miss Porter is baffling because one cannot take hold of her work in any of the obvious ways. She makes none of the melodramatic or ironic points that are the stock in trade of ordinary short stories; she falls into none of the usual patterns and she does not

<sup>38</sup>New York Times Book Review, September 17, 1944, p. 1. Cited in Schwartz, p. 245.

<sup>39</sup>"Books of the Times," New York Times, September 18, 1944. Cited in Schwartz, p. 245.

<sup>40</sup>"The Atlantic Bookshelf," Atlantic, CLXXIV (November 1944), 131. Cited in Schwartz, p. 245.

show anyone's influence. She does not exploit her personality either inside or outside her work, and her writing itself makes a surface so smooth that the critic has little opportunity to point out peculiarities of color or weave. If he is tempted to say that the effect is pale, he is prevented by the realization that Miss Porter writes English of a purity and precision almost unique in contemporary American fiction. If he tries to demur with the accelerating pace or arrive at the final intensity that he is in the habit of expecting in short stories, he is deterred by a nibbling suspicion that he may not have grasped its meaning and have it hit him with a sudden impact some moments after he has finished reading.

Not that this meaning is simple to formulate even after one has felt its emotional force. The limpidity of the sentence, the exactitude of the phrase, are deceptive in that the thing they convey continues to seem elusive even after it has been communicated. These stories are not illustrations of anything that is reducible to a moral law, or a political or social analysis, or even a principle of human behavior. What they show us are human relations in their constantly shifting phases and in the moments of which their existence is made. There is no place for general reflections; you are to live through the experience as the characters do. And yet the writer has managed to say something about the values involved in the experience. But what is it?<sup>41</sup>

Vernon A. Young, in a lengthy article published that same year in the *New Mexico Quarterly*,<sup>42</sup> claims that the smoothness of the style, as Wilson suggests, is the very reason why Miss Porter has not had, up to that time, a wide reading audience. In addition, Young points out, Miss Porter avoids dramatic effect in favor of psychological insight; thus her stories seem inconclusive. But, he says, "any effect of inconclusiveness is abrogated by faultless structure; aesthetic completeness is exhibited by the form of her stories, making dialectic simplification unnecessary."<sup>43</sup>

Thus, with all the short story volumes published, Miss Porter's

<sup>41</sup>"Books: Katherine Anne Porter," *New Yorker*, September 30, 1944, p. 64.

<sup>42</sup>"The Art of Katherine Anne Porter," *New Mexico Quarterly*, XV (Autumn 1945), 331.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

popular reputation came to a standstill at a level that, as has been observed before, was not sufficient to support her financially. Her reputation among critics, however, began to take on new aspects. Her stories were examined again and again in scholarly articles, some of which dealt with only one story, while others tried to find psychological or biographical patterns to fit a number of the stories into. Of the former kind, one example is William Bysshe Stein's interpretation of "Theft" in terms of Freudian and Christian symbols.<sup>44</sup> Of the latter kind, one example is S. H. Poss's analysis of "The Circus," "Old Mortality," "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," and "The Grave" (all Miranda tales) in terms of a theme he calls "What Is Worth Belonging To";<sup>45</sup> another is James William Johnson's "Another Look at Katherine Anne Porter," which attempts to group all the stories within five themes. The first is the theme of the individual within his heritage, the relationship of past to present in the mind (the Miranda tales); the second, the theme of cultural displacement, the individual in an alien culture which permits him to discover the inherent nature of human evil ("The Leaning Tower" and "Flowering Judas"); the third, the theme of the self-delusion attendant on unhappy marriages ("Rope," "That Tree," "A Day's Work," "The Cracked Looking-Glass"); the fourth, the theme of the death of love and the survival of individual integrity ("Pale Horse, Pale Rider," "The Downward Path to Wisdom," "Theft"); and, finally, the theme of man's subjugation to his own fate ("Noon Wine," "Magic," "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall").<sup>46</sup> Johnson's

<sup>44</sup>"Theft": Porter's Politics of Modern Love," Perspective, XI (Winter 1960), 223-228.

<sup>45</sup>"Variations on a Theme in Four Stories of Katherine Anne Porter," Twentieth Century Literature, IV (April-July 1958), 21-29.

<sup>46</sup>Virginia Quarterly Review, XXXVI (Autumn 1960), 598-613.

analysis demonstrates the amazing variety of experiences and characters Miss Porter portrays in her stories as well as the impossibility of pigeon-holing them. Perhaps the most frustrating aspect of her fiction for the critic is the impossibility of classifying her stories. The safest method of classification, if classification there must be, remains that according to setting or to subject matter: these stories are Miranda tales; those are stories about Mexico; and those--"Theft," "Rope," "Magic," and "Holiday," to name a few--are "others." The basic reason is that, with many stories, several of these arbitrarily distinguished themes are present at once. In "That Tree," for example, the first four of Johnson's "themes" are present--thus, any attempt to locate the story by a single theme is futile. The fact is that each story must stand by itself in regard to setting, subject matter, and theme; for, as Vernon Young aptly phrases it, "in Miss Porter's narratives, context is all."<sup>47</sup> For this reason, in examining the body of Porter criticism, one finds that those articles which have confined themselves to dealing with one story or with a few stories, one at a time, always shed more light on Miss Porter's artistry than those which have attempted, as with Johnson, to fit the Porter canon into the bed of Procrustes.

In brief, Katherine Anne Porter's literary reputation, both popular and critical, before the publication of Ship of Fools, can be summed up in the term "writer's writer," bestowed on her in the early years of her career and meant as a sincere compliment. As the years went by the term came to mean a writer whose stylistic perfection should serve as a model to other writers and whose artistic perception is acute

<sup>47</sup>Young, p. 327.

and important enough to be studied by critics and scholars alike but whose stories, excellent as they are, are not being read by nearly as many people as are stories by other, less competent writers. In this sense, the term takes on all the characteristics of a stigma. This, fortunately, has been removed, once and for all, by the popularity of Ship of Fools.

## II.

The popularity of the novel was immediate. In less than a month it achieved first place on the best-seller list and held that place for almost seven months. It remained within the top ten on the list for a year after its publication; its popularity rated a parody in the June 16, 1962, issue of the New Yorker.<sup>48</sup> Much of the novel's success among the reading public was undoubtedly due to the prolonged anticipation of a novel by Katherine Anne Porter. In Mark Schorer's words, "This novel has been famous for years. It has been awaited through an entire literary generation."<sup>49</sup> This phenomenon also accounts for the fact that the novel was the occasion of reviews and feature articles on Miss Porter in practically every major periodical. The most prominent of these is Glenway Wescott's lengthy portrait of her in the April, 1962, Atlantic.<sup>50</sup> Few first novels have received as much free advertising.

In general, the reviewers' reaction to the novel reflects a deep respect for its author. Any work by Katherine Anne Porter, their

<sup>48</sup>Peter DeVries, "Nobody's Fool," New Yorker, June 16, 1962, pp. 28-29.

<sup>49</sup>"We Are All on the Passenger List," New York Times Book Review, April 1, 1962, p. 1.

<sup>50</sup>Op. cit., above, note 17.

initial attitude seems to be, is worthy of serious and complete attention. Thus, if anything, the first reviewers to write about Ship of Fools were biased in its favor. By far the most enthusiastic review and the one most unreserved in its praise was that of Mark Schorer in The New York Times Book Review. Beginning with his comment, already cited, that a whole literary generation has awaited the appearance of this novel, Schorer fairly bursts with joy in saying, "Now it is suddenly, superbly here. It would have been worth waiting for another thirty years if one had any hope of having them. It is our good fortune that it comes at least in our time. It will endure, one hardly risks anything in saying, far beyond it, for many literary generations. . . . There is nothing (or almost nothing) harsh in her book," he says later on. "There is much that is comic, much even that is hilarious, and everything throughout is always flashing into brilliance through the illuminations of this great ironic style. At the same time, almost everything that is comic is simultaneously pathetic; what is funny is also sad, moving to the point of pain, nearly of heart-break."<sup>51</sup> In the end, Schorer feels compelled to compare Ship of Fools with the greatest novels of the past hundred years. "Call it, for convenience," he concludes, "the 'Middlemarch' of a later day. And be grateful."<sup>52</sup>

The vast majority of reviewers, however, while managing to display the same respect for the novel and for Miss Porter, were not moved to lay on such lavish and unqualified praise. Generally speaking, what these reviewers have in common is the attempt, in addition to re-

<sup>51</sup>Schorer, p. 1.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

cording their reactions to the novel, to criticize and analyze the structure or some of the characters or even the relation of the author to the characters. In other words, they assume the dual role of reviewer and critic. Stanley Edgar Hyman, for example, begins his review by identifying Miss Porter's personality in Jenny Brown as youth, in Mrs. Treadwell as middle age, and in La Condesa as "the author when she finished the novel." With such a beginning, it is little wonder that Hyman concludes, "There are powerful scenes throughout the book, and the language is everywhere distinguished. But I am afraid that ultimately we are disgusted rather than moved."<sup>53</sup> Stanley Kaufman's review consists largely of criticism of the style, which he finds too smooth, and of the structural device of wandering from character to character. This, he claims, very soon becomes repetitious and wearisome; the characters, after their third or fourth appearances, are completely predictable. Concluding his review, he says, "Miss Porter is writing of the 'majestic and terrible failure of Western man,' but all one can feel on finishing this book is that if this is Western man, it is high time that he failed and there is little majesty or terror in it. . . . The book is less tragic than satiric; but satire about a huge complex of civilizations ceases to be satire and becomes misanthropy. . . . The title of the book becomes more literal than figurative, and the whole effect is smaller than we anticipate from Miss Porter's crowning work."<sup>54</sup>

The essence of Granville Hicks's review reflects this same attitude

<sup>53</sup>"Archetypal Women, Archetypal Germans," The New Leader, XLV (April 2, 1962), 23-24.

<sup>54</sup>"Katherine Anne Porter's Crowning Work," The New Republic, CXLVI (April 2, 1962), 23-25.

of disappointment. The intention of the novel, Hicks points out, is larger than "a polemic against a particular political system [or] even . . . a defense of the downtrodden. Miss Porter is saying something about the voyage of life, and what she is saying is somber indeed." Thus, Ship of Fools, he concludes, "for all its lucidity and all its insights, leaves the reader a little cold. There is in it, so far as I can see, no sense of human possibility."<sup>55</sup>

The general attitude of the reviewers who first wrote about Ship of Fools is that if the novel fails to live up to the quality of the best of Katherine Anne Porter's stories, a failure by Katherine Anne Porter is better than most writers' successes and that this novel, while falling just short of true artistic greatness, is important enough to deserve the attention of everyone. No doubt this recommendation played a large part in the public's whole-hearted acceptance of the novel.

But vague murmurs of disappointment and discontent with the over-all effect of the novel as expressed in the reviews of Kaufman and Hicks were later to erupt into out-and-out condemnation of the novel's characters and style in two note-worthy investives. The first of these, printed in the Minnesota Review under the guise of a book review, is written by Erna Weber.<sup>56</sup> The other, by Theodore Solotaroff, is the first serious critical article to be devoted to Ship of Fools.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>55</sup>"Voyage of Life," Saturday Review, XLV (March 31, 1962), 15-16.

<sup>56</sup>III (Fall 1962), 127-130.

<sup>57</sup>"'Ship of Fools' and the Critics," Commentary, XXIV (October 1962), 277-286.

Weber, about half-way through his article, finally owns up to the fact that he is not writing a review of the novel, "rather an expression of regret that it was published at all."<sup>58</sup> He is particularly resentful of the popular success of the novel. "What is there in our culture," he asks, "which encourages the fiasco of a Ship of Fools, anoints it with the benediction of the Book-of-the-Month Club, arranges for its sale to Hollywood . . . and causes some of our hitherto judicious critics [Schorer in particular] to lose their heads?"<sup>59</sup> The root of his criticism is his objection to Miss Porter's style as displayed in the novel. To him it is "pure soap-opera or women's-magazine" and the inevitable result of such muddled writing is muddled thinking. Thus, Ship of Fools is a fiasco.

Solotaroff's jumping-off point is the implication that the reviewers who praise the book solely out of respect for Miss Porter and out of sympathy for her twenty-year struggle with her first novel are the ones who deserve first-class accommodations on her ship. They write, he feels certain, at the cost of their own integrity, for they surely know better. Solotaroff's objections are first, that "no effective principle of change operates on the action or on the main characters or on the ideas, and hence the book has virtually no power to sustain, complicate, and intensify either our intellectual interests or emotional attachments,"<sup>60</sup> and second, that Miss Porter is really lacking "the soul of humanity," exemplified by her "morbid attitude toward human sexuality," which leads her inevitably to a purely ironic attitude

<sup>58</sup>Weber, p. 128.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>60</sup>Solotaroff, p. 280.

towards her characters--an attitude as shallow as it is stagnant.

Thus, Ship of Fools is the still-born child of a clever but dottering old misanthrope.<sup>61</sup>

Solotaroff's reason for objecting to the novel is an extreme one; but his conclusion that the novel is a failure is one that is shared by many. Their reasons are that, because the novel has no plot and very little action, it must be a psychological or character novel. Therefore, it is responsible for portraying character development in an interesting and dramatic way. The characters in Ship of Fools, however, are thoroughly and accurately drawn very early in the novel; they are, therefore, predictable. As a result of the lack of action and the predictability of the characters, the "scenes" of which the novel is constructed are repetitious and monotonous. Even Miss Porter's style, on which her literary reputation had been primarily based, falls far below that of the best of her stories and adds to the dullness of the over-all effect. The obvious social implications, which would certainly have given the novel status had it been written thirty years ago, count for very little today, as far as artistic achievement is concerned. Ship of Fools, as a statement on the human condition, presents a world-view of man dominated by the evil within himself, with no apparent hope of redemption. The failure of the novel may be due to a weakening of Miss Porter's hold on her style, or it may be the result of her inherent antipathy to the human race, or both. At any rate, both these conditions are clearly discernible in Ship of Fools.

The seriousness of this charge against the novel can hardly be

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 286.

overstated; for, if it is true, there ought to be, even in her earliest fiction, some indication of her inherent misanthropy.

But there is no such indication in any of her stories; the charge of misanthropy is totally new to Miss Porter. Is the novel, then, as a work of art, completely isolated from the rest of her fiction? Or is there, on the other hand, an indication that the novel and her stories are all parts of one whole? Indeed, there is. In her preface to the Modern Library edition of Flowering Judas and Other Stories, written in 1940, she says:

. . . They [the stories in this volume] were done with intention and in firm faith, though I had no plan for their future and no notion of what their meaning might be to such readers as they would find. To any speculations from interested sources as to why there were not more of them, I can answer simply and truthfully that I was not one of those who could flourish in the conditions of the past two decades. They are fragments of a much larger plan which I am still engaged in carrying out, and they are what I was then able to achieve in the way of order and form and statement in a period of grotesque dislocations in a whole society when the world was heaving in the sickness of a millennial change. . . . For myself, and I was not alone, all the conscious and recollected years of my life have been lived to this day under the heavy threat of world catastrophe, and most of the energies of my mind and spirit have been spent in the effort to grasp the meaning of those threats, to trace them to their sources and to understand the logic of this majestic and terrible failure of the life of man in the Western world. . . .

This is the most often quoted of all Miss Porter's critical statements, for it contains the promise of a "much larger plan," which has often been interpreted to mean the novel itself; but it is clear that Miss Porter means to include the stories in Flowering Judas as well. Also, Pale Horse, Pale Rider had already been published at the time the above statement was written. The indication seems to be clear enough that she intends for all her published fiction to be considered as a whole; and this, as she herself points out, is the primary reason for her care-

ful selectivity in publishing stories.

Her artistic purpose, as she phrases it, is to give "order and form and statement in a period of grotesque dislocations in a whole society," and "to understand the logic of this majestic and terrible failure of the life of man in the Western world." This is as explicit a statement of the artist's intention and, at the same time, as much of a clue to "the figure in the carpet" as any author can be expected to give. It is also a question and part of an answer. Why has man failed? The way to begin finding out is to trace the central and unifying theme that runs through all Miss Porter's fiction, including the novel: the struggle of the individual to create or to find for himself order and personal integrity in a chaotic society and, in doing so, to preserve his identity with his own way of life--whether that way be artistic, professional, or moral. The object, then, is to compare how Miss Porter applies "order and form and statement" in Ship of Fools with the way she applies them in some of her most successful stories. This will reveal, primarily, whether there has been a shift in Miss Porter's attitude from compassion to misanthropy and, secondarily, whether Miss Porter has reached an understanding "of this majestic and terrible failure of the life of man in the Western world."

### III.

The first requirement for judging Ship of Fools a success or a failure as a novel is to determine what kind of novel it is intended to be. Attacks against it have often come about as a result of a confusion of the term "novel," used in its broadest sense to mean an extended narrative in prose, with various fictional forms of more specific definition. The first key to an analysis of Ship of Fools, even before

the characters themselves are examined, therefore, is the form, or convention, in which Miss Porter has chosen to write her novel. The short preface to Ship of Fools is devoted to this question:

The title of this book is a translation from the German of Das Narrenschiff, a moral allegory by Sebastian Brant (1458?-1521) first published in Latin as Stultifera Navis in 1494. I read it in Basel in the summer of 1932 when I still had vividly in mind the impressions of my first voyage to Europe. When I began thinking about my novel, I took for my own this simple almost universal image of the ship of this world on its voyage to eternity. It is by no means new--it was very old and durable and dearly familiar when Brant used it; and it suits my purpose exactly. I am a passenger on that ship.

There are two indications contained in this statement that fix Ship of Fools within a specific literary convention. The first is the title itself, chosen finally after two other titles, "The Promised Land," and "No Safe Harbor," had been rejected.<sup>62</sup> The second is the thorough, scholarly identification of Miss Porter's work with Brant's. Miss Porter's novel is not intended, of course, as an imitation of Brant's work or even as an allegory working entirely within the confines of the "ship of fools" convention. It is what Miss Porter adds to the convention that constitutes the value of Ship of Fools as a literary piece. But merely to locate the novel within the convention is to explain many of the techniques and devices used in its structure.

The basic intention behind the "ship of fools" convention is satire, and it is satire directed against types of human folly. This is true not only of Brant's work but of a nineteenth century American "ship of fools" novel, Melville's Confidence Man. When Miss Porter is dealing with a general human folly, such as race prejudice, her intention, in keeping with the convention, is satirical, her tone is ironical, and

<sup>62</sup>Hyman, p. 23.

the folly, when it is actively portrayed in individuals, is generally held up to ridicule. But her principal contribution to the whole convention is that she manifests an interest in human beings as individuals as well as types. She can note the similarities among all the Americans or among all the unmarried women aboard the Vera, yet it is the differences among these very people that are her primary concern. Thus, it is with a bow to the convention that in her "cast of characters" she lists the passengers according to nationality; but her second list reveals her own artistic imagination at work in placing, as cabin-mates, such unlikely pairs as Jenny and Elsa Lutz, Mrs. Treadwell and Lizzie, and Rieber and Lowenthal.

It is Miss Porter's conformity to the "ship of fools" convention, also, that explains the basic structure of the novel. The structure of Das Narrenschiff is separate episodes for each vice or folly; Melville's novel portrays a central character (in several disguises) meeting up with various types of gullible Americans in brief scenes. Miss Porter's Ship of Fools is divided into three main sections: introduction of characters, development and explanation of their individual follies, and, in most cases, revelation of the real factors motivating the individual in his folly. Or, as Ray B. West concludes from the three section headings, "man persists in setting sail for happiness, only to find himself, after all, houseless and homeless, to become aware at last that his city is doomed."<sup>63</sup> It is interesting to note, in this regard, that the three proposed titles for the novel set up the same progression. Within the main sections, of course, there are no chapter headings, only scene divisions marked by breaks in the narrative. Through this device, which suits her

<sup>63</sup>Katherine Anne Porter, Univ. of Minn. Pamphlets on Am. Writers, No. 28 (Minneapolis, 1963), p. 34.

her purpose exactly, Miss Porter is able to keep all the characters alive at once, even though they do not all interact with one another as they would do in a novel of plot. In addition, each character is given what seems to be equal treatment in the revelation of his character and of his particular folly; and no character stands out as hero or heroine as one would do in a novel of plot. As a result, no one folly is made out to be worse (in a moral sense) than any other--the folly is only important as it affects the life of the individual caught up in it. Thus, through this episodic structure, through the omniscient point of view, and through the cold, dispassionate tone of the style, Miss Porter suspends moral judgment on her characters and only implies what the fate of each of them, in this world, will be.

But this is not to say that she is unsympathetic with the plight of her characters or that she lacks compassion for the human situation; in no case is the feeling conveyed that the fate of a character caught up in folly will be more or less than he deserves. Not all the passengers on board the Vera, after all, are depicted as fools. The ship's crew and officers, for example, with the exception of the officer who kisses Mrs. Treadwell, the purser, and of course the Captain, work efficiently at their jobs and do not become involved in the follies portrayed among the first class passengers. The steerage passengers, with the exception of the communist agitator in the cherry-colored shirt, are victims of a chaotic world and not of their own folly; they are the life force itself, primeval and unsophisticated--thus they escape being held up to ridicule by the author. Even some of the first-class passengers are not fools, namely, the Mexican bride and groom, Senora Ortega, her child, and his nurse. These characters all play decidedly minor roles in the novel; for Miss Porter's emphasis, in keeping with the convention, is on those characters who are fools. Yet the very presence of the "innocent" characters is proof that she is not making the sweeping general-

ization that everyone in the world is a fool. It is the convention that explains the emphasis on certain characters over others; and it is this emphasis that has led to the charge that Miss Porter lacks compassion for humanity. The charge, therefore, is the result of a misconception about the significance of the emphasis on fools rather than on the wise and the good.

Another aspect of the "ship of fools" convention to which Miss Porter was undoubtedly attracted is the concern for problems--individual vices or social conditions--of the age. She is very careful to locate her novel in a precise historical context, one which is loaded with social and political overtones that are reflected in the attitudes of many of the passengers. The opening scene, for example, with its account of the mistaken bombing of the Swedish consulate in Vera Cruz, reminds the reader that Mexico was still in its period of revolutions and political upheaval. The social situation is cleverly reflected in the deformed cripple who lives on hand-outs, in the passivity of the Indian sitting under a tree, and in ruling-class attitudes of the merchants and factory-owners reading the newspaper. It is in this setting that the passengers are introduced, suffering from the heat and from the criminal treatment of the natives towards them. For a brief moment, at least, the passengers are united in their suffering in much the same way as the steerage passengers will be portrayed. It is only after they are on board ship, where they are once again able to draw lines of race and class around themselves, that their follies come to the surface and isolate each of them. The first stop the ship makes is at Cuba, where the steerage passengers board; they are being deported back to Spain because they are no longer needed as laborers in the Cuban sugar fields, idle because of the collapse in the sugar market. Thus, the reminder is given that August, 1931, was the midst of the world-wide depression, a social situation

that gave rise to, among other things, the politics of communism, represented by the fat man in the cherry-colored shirt who travels in steerage. Another social-political condition is reflected in the person of La Condesa, who will carry her subversive politics into Spain, a country destined to realize revolution soon. Finally, the destination of the Vera points up the political situation in Germany, the nation that was well on its way to subjugation by Nazism by that time, although any reference to Hitler and the Nazi party is left out of the novel.

The condition of the world, then, in which the passengers on board the Vera have lived and will continue to live, is plainly chaotic; it is the kind of chaos that gives rise to the dreams of such men as Dr. Schumann, Herr Freytag, and even Herr Graf, that, by returning once more to Germany, they can either find peace for the final moments of their lives or re-orient their lives into some kind of order. Thus, the central irony of the novel: the voyage to the "promised land" of eternity is a voyage to a situation far worse than any of them had previously encountered; it is Nazi Germany. The irony is not so much that these Germans are disillusioned, but that the situation in Germany will be exactly what they deserve because their own attitudes have created or have at least helped to create that very situation. These attitudes are reflected in the remark of Herr Rieber that he would throw members of the low classes into ovens and turn on the gas, and in the obsession of Captain Thiele for order and efficiency which results in depriving the Basque wood-carver of his means of support and of artistic expression. Concern for the social situation and the political implications of her characters' actions has been manifested by Miss Porter in some of her best stories and cannot, therefore, be attributed solely to the "ship of fools" convention. "Flowering Judas" and "Hacienda" are both set in Mexico during the revolutions; "The Leaning Tower" is set in Germany

in the winter of 1931-32; and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" is set in the western United States during the first world war. But of all these stories, while the social and political situation strongly affects the lives of the main characters, only in "The Leaning Tower," the story of pre-Nazi Germany, is it implied that the characters themselves have helped to create the political situation or that they could alter it in any way even if they tried. In Ship of Fools--and, even here, this applies only to the Germans--there is the implied notion that social upheaval does indeed trap the individual and sometimes overwhelm him, but also that social movements are made up of individuals thinking and behaving in a certain manner and that, ironically, those caught up in this kind of social change are victims of their own attitudes and behavior. That such a notion should be confined to the German situation points out Miss Porter's bias against Germany as a nation and against Germans as a race, a bias which she spends so much of her novel in demonstrating that the point becomes overworked. It is an undeniable flaw in Ship of Fools.

What Miss Porter's prejudice does in terms of individual characterization, however, is to cause her to draw several oversimplified German characters, characters who are susceptible to the charge of being predictable. Frau Rittersdorf and Frau Schmitt, widows whose lives are still dominated by the force that was embodied in their husbands, are representative of the German citizenry who were later to stand by and watch Nazism take control of Germany, voicing their approval by their silence. Although the two women do not get along with one another because Frau Rittersdorf is so much more pompous and aggressive than "little" Frau Schmitt, Miss Porter is more concerned with their roles as German citizens than as individuals struggling in a chaotic world. Both women solve their dilemma by consigning their responsibility as members of society to the judgment of men who are obviously

in authority. Once this consignment is made, the lives of Frau Rittersdorf and Frau Schmitt are set, and their doom is sealed.

The characterizations of the German married couples, the Huttens and the Baumgartners, are more thoroughly and carefully drawn, however. Herr Baumgartner's life-long failure to come to terms with this role of husband and father has resulted in a psychosomatic stomach ailment for which the only remedy is alcohol. In the comic, melodramatic scene in which he threatens suicide (apparently a device he frequently employs to gain the sympathy of his wife), then waits for his wife to rescue him from jumping over-board--"just at the very split second Gretel should come running with her arms stretched towards him, hands clasped, imploring, 'Oh nonono, waitwait my love forgive me!'" (p. 454)--he demonstrates his absolute dependence on his wife, the complete surrender of his individuality to her.<sup>64</sup> The total dependence of one person upon another, which is one way of escaping the responsibility of finding one's identity in a chaotic world, is also the theme of two of Miss Porter's stories, "Magic," the strange account of the enslavement of a New Orleans prostitute, body and soul, to her madame, and "That Tree," in which the dependence of the "journalist" narrator upon his wife Miriam is almost identical in its melodramatic overtones to that of Herr Baumgartner on his wife.

The relationship of the Huttens is based on what amounts to a "Victorian compromise," an unwritten, unspoken agreement that certain feelings are not

<sup>64</sup>It is an interesting speculation that Herr Baumgartner's proposed suicide is based on Miss Porter's real-life experiences with the poet Hart Crane in Mexico in the early spring of the year of her voyage. George Hendrick's account, *op. cit.*, above, note 4, makes fascinating reading. He finds similarities in Crane's suicide by jumping over-board from a ship in the Havana harbor in April of 1932 and in both Baumgartner's threat and the rescue of the bulldog by Echegaray, who drowns in the attempt. Neither of these characters, Hendrick cautions, are Crane; but the incidents are no doubt rooted in Crane's suicide.

to be admitted--even if they are real--in order to preserve the harmony of the marriage contract. It is a contract shattered, perhaps irreparably, when Frau Hutten deliberately contradicts her husband in a philosophical argument at the Captain's table about the nature of evil; the breach in their relationship is mended--permanently or temporarily Miss Porter does not say--by the attempted drowning and rescue of their child-substitute, the bulldog Bebe.

The relationship of Herr Rieber with Lizzie Spockenkleker is perhaps open to the charge of being predictable, but the whole comic effect of his determination to seduce her and her determination to extract a promise of marriage is rooted in the very inevitability of the failure of both. In the meantime, the many scenes involving the pair provide comic relief; and they demonstrate Miss Porter's ability to draw two really ridiculous characters, thus relieving her of the charge of creating an over-blown soap opera.

Karl Glocken and Elsa Lutz are two characters who share the common plight of having to live outside the mainstream of society as a result of defects, not in their characters, but in their appearances. Miss Porter's statement about them is simply that, as a part of the human condition, certain individuals are doomed to a way of life they had no part in creating; their plight is shared by the cripple in the opening scene of the novel; and the acceptance of a situation which altogether defies human control is the theme, as well, of Miss Porter's most recent and very beautiful story, "Holiday."<sup>65</sup> Miss Porter shows a good deal of compassion for such people; but in the end she is forced to admit that they can only be pitied for their isolation, but not helped. They are free, at least, of the stain of folly

<sup>65</sup>John V. Hagopian, "Katherine Anne Porter: Feeling, Form and Truth," Four Quarters, XII (November 1962), 9, also offers this interpretation in the only explanation of "Holiday" published to date.

that is so inherent in the lives of many of their more fortunately endowed fellow human beings. The story "Holiday," incidentally, stands as monumental proof that Miss Porter has lost none of the perfection of her style. This story should rank among the very best of her artistic achievements, alongside such stories as "Flowering Judas" and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider."

Herr Wilibald Graf, the dying wheelchair patient, on the other hand, is a man who refuses to accept himself for what he is and persists in believing that he has supernatural powers given directly to him by God. It is a belief he imposes, not only upon himself, but selfishly upon his nephew, Johann, who responds with a bitterness to match his uncle's fanaticism. This theme of the individual refusing to accept his own situation and, in doing so, failing to establish his identity as an individual, is the same theme that operates, in a slightly different way, in two of Miss Porter's stories, "The Cracked Looking-Glass" and "A Day's Work." Both of these, interestingly enough, are written in an Irish-American idiom, one in which Miss Porter is adept. In "The Cracked Looking-Glass," Rosaline is unhappily married to a man much older than herself, for whom she must care in much the same manner as Johann cares for his uncle. Rosaline establishes contacts with several young men, but refuses to admit that she is seeking any sexual union with any of them. The realization that she is doing just that is forced upon her, and she ends by accepting her role as caretaker of her dying husband. In "A Day's Work," Mr. Halloran refuses to admit the reality of his own situation, constantly placing his hopes in vague political connections. The frustrations that are built up in his wife over the years are all released suddenly in a scene that closely resembles Mrs. Treadwell's beating William Denny. But immediately afterward, Mrs. Halloran pretends in a telephone conversation with her daughter that she too places confidence in her husband's political connections. Essentially, however, she never

becomes reconciled to her situation. It is uncertain, in the novel, whether Herr Graf really comes to an acceptance of his own humanity, but he at least accepts his nephew as an individual and, in doing so, performs an unselfish act. At once his nephew's attitude towards his duties is transformed. Thus, with Rosaline and with Herr Graf, there is an indication, however vague, of redemption.

Perhaps the most carefully and thoroughly examined relationship in the novel is that of Jenny Brown with David Scott. Jenny and David are artists, first of all, searching for form and meaning in a chaotic world, for a frame of reference in which to place their art. But they are also two young Americans in search of a frame of reference in which to place their lives. These things they have in common; and, for the time being, they choose to carry on their search together. The fact that they do so necessarily leads them into an examination of the meaning of love as applied to their own lives, and it is in this aspect of their relationship that they learn their essential incompatibility. David's stubborn plan to see Spain and to omit France from his European tour and Jenny's desire to visit France above all else is the surface indication of the differences in their personalities. As an artist, Jenny prefers bright splashes of color, even in her own clothing; David dresses only in white, black, and grey. Jenny's gregariousness bothers David, who is generally reticent about mixing socially or participating in rallies and demonstrations, to which Jenny is constantly attracted. Throughout the voyage, Jenny makes sketches of practically everyone; but none of them is ever completed or ever made a part of a finished work. David does no painting on the voyage--he takes his art seriously and devotes his full attention to a work from start to finish; a ship, he feels, is no artist's studio. Jenny has no illusions that she has ever been the only girl in David's life, yet she trusts him completely

to be faithful to her; David grows increasingly jealous of Jenny's distant and uninvolved attachment to Freytag until he is forced to spy on them.

The differences between Jenny and David can be reduced to the fact that David, at heart, is a twentieth-century Puritan, with his subdued taste in clothes, his fastidious attention to cleanliness, his sense of loyalty (he never seeks out a Spanish dancer), and his concern for appearances (he and Jenny never sleep together aboard ship for that reason,, in spite of the carryings-on of Rieber and Lizzie and the rumors about La Condesa and her young men, not to mention the professional activities of the zarzuela company). Jenny, on the other hand, is seeking to free herself from social restrictions of all kinds and to become a totally independent individual. The refusal of Jenny and David to admit dependence on one another is the source of their incompatibility and the reason why, inevitably, the European voyage will prove to be the final break-up in their relationship with one another. Miss Porter handles much this same material in the story "Rope," in which a young married couple come to realize their differences as a result of an argument over the purchase of a piece of rope by the husband. The failure on the part of Jenny and David to admit interdependence is exactly the opposite of Herr Baumgartner's failure to assert his own individuality. These two extremes point out the difficulty, as Miss Porter sees it, that the individual has in coming to terms with himself and, at the same time, in being able to involve himself with another individual in the kind of relationship that requires a certain dependence on that individual. It is the essential problem in all marriages, she believes, as she has explicitly stated in an article, "Marriage is Belonging."<sup>66</sup>

<sup>66</sup>The Days Before, pp. 185-191.

The relationship of Dr. Schumann with La Condesa is that of a man who has long since found his identity within a fixed moral code and has lived within its confines but who now finds himself in love with an individual who defies, by her very way of life, every precept of that morality. La Condesa is unquestionably the most mysterious passenger aboard the Vera; rarely, and then only in the briefest glimpses, is the action revealed through La Condesa's eyes, even in the scenes in which she is obviously the principal character. Miss Porter prefers to keep her veiled in rumor and in the reports, official and unofficial, that others make about her. She is a person who lives solely for herself. Finding the realities of her existence intolerable, she resorts to a variety of measures to escape them, including ether sniffing, taking dope, and making advances to young men. She is reconciled to her way of life; or, if she is not, she refuses to make the effort to live any other way. If La Condesa is involved in a conflict at all, it is the conflict resulting from her efforts to preserve her way of life in the face of the political opposition of the Cuban government and the moral opposition of Dr. Schumann.

Dr. Schumann himself, as soon as he recognizes the extent of his involvement with La Condesa, considers the situation one in which his lifetime of moral strength is being tested by the presence of pure evil. At the same time, he is in love with La Condesa and cares a good deal what happens to her, so much so that he becomes the source of her dope supply. When La Condesa lands at Vigo, Dr. Schumann suddenly becomes aware of a whole new aspect of his relationship:

The doctor suffered the psychic equivalent of a lightning stroke, which cleared away there and then his emotional fogs and vapors, and he faced his truth, nearly intolerable but the kind of pain he could deal with, something he recognized and accepted unconditionally. His lapse into the dire, the criminal sentimental cruelty of the past days was merely the symptom of his moral collapse: he had refused to

acknowledge the wrong he had done La Condesa his patient, he had taken advantage of her situation as prisoner, he had tormented her with his guilty love and yet had refused her--and himself--any human joy in it. He had let her go in hopelessness without even the faintest promise of future help or deliverance. What a coward, what a swine. . . . (p. 373)

But when he sends a note offering future help and deliverance, it is returned to him without an answer. La Condesa has refused him; indeed, she is glad to be rid of him for he was a threat to her way of life.

Later, after Dr. Schumann has made the rounds, repairing the damage resulting from the masquerade, he returns to his bunk disgusted. "In that moment, when he truly expected death, he looked upon all these intruders as his enemies. Without exception, he rejected them all, every one of them, all human kinship with them . . . He did not in the least care what became of any one of them (p. 469). He has come through the relationship badly shaken; his life is not destroyed, but he has been made aware of his own weaknesses so that, by the time he reaches Germany and his wife, he is on the brink of losing his convictions, the fool of a woman who only used him in every way she could without his ever recognizing it.

Of all the Vera's passengers, the character who is most vividly portrayed is that of Mrs. Treadwell. Critics have noticed the similarity in Mrs. Treadwell's age with that of Miss Porter at the time of her European voyage. But there are a great many dissimilarities, as well, between the author and her creation; and a strict biographical reading of Mrs. Treadwell is not valid. But Miss Porter seems to understand Mrs. Treadwell's situation better than that of any other character. Mrs. Treadwell's situation differs from that of Frau Rittersdorf and Frau Schmitt in that she is divorced after a very unhappy marriage, whereas they are both widowed after apparently happy marriages (at least they are convinced that their marriages were happy). Mrs. Treadwell is a woman alone by choice, and her unhappiness is

the direct result of her own self-betrayal. This is a theme in which Miss Porter seems to be particularly at home; three of her best stories have as their theme the woman as self-betrayer. They are "Flowering Judas," "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," and "Theft."

In "Flowering Judas," Laura is a twenty-two-year-old spinster living in Mexico during the revolutions. She is a special friend of Braggioni, a leader of the revolution, but she is not his mistress. In fact, she has refused his love just as she refused the love of an army captain and a young, serenading youth. She no longer believes in the principles of the revolution as she once did, having been disillusioned by the person of Braggioni himself. Even so, she aids in the revolutionary cause by conveying secret messages to the members of the revolution who are imprisoned. By the end of the story, Laura slips poison to Eugenio, an imprisoned revolutionary, so that he may die without betraying any secrets. That night, in her dream, Laura meets Eugenio, who gives her the flowers of the judas tree, telling her to take them and eat. She does, and at once Eugenio shouts at her that she is a cannibal and a murderer, eating his flesh and blood. Laura's cannibalism is the betrayal, not only of the revolution (as a result of her disillusionment with Braggioni) but, more important, of herself by her refusal to become personally committed to or involved in any kind of human relationship. At twenty-two, she is a frigid, old woman.

Set in a western American city during World War I, "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" shows Miranda as a young woman in her twenties working for a newspaper. She is in love with Adam, a trained but inexperienced soldier due to leave for the front in a few days. Eventually, Miranda falls victim to the flu epidemic of 1918. But in the few days before she becomes really ill, she has several encounters with society in wartime. The first is in the form of two "patriots" who try to intimidate her into buying war bonds. She

is able to stall them, but she hasn't the courage to tell them what she really feels about their line of work. Her second experience is as a "charity worker," calling on a hospital where soldiers who have not yet gone overseas are sick or injured. She dislikes the whole idea, but she participates, and in the end she cannot bring herself to condemn the practice. Her third experience is at the theater, where a liberty bond salesman gives his pitch just before the third act of the play. Miranda complains to Adam afterward, but she goes ahead and sings a patriotic song along with the rest of the audience. After her illness forces her into the hospital, she falls into a coma in which she dreams that the doctor is a German soldier and the hospital personnel are executioners. When she awakens, she learns that the war is over, but she resents having been brought back to life because she is convinced that she has betrayed Adam, and her life is worthless. She has betrayed him by being a participant, however unwillingly, in the wartime society and by not having either the courage or the ability to protect him from the war. And, in betraying him, she has betrayed herself, so that, at the end of the story, she leaves the hospital considering herself a corpse disguised as a living person, looking forward only to emptiness for the remainder of her life.

But the most concise and, in many ways, the most eloquent statement of this theme is in the story "Theft." The narrator, also a young spinster, loses her purse and reconstructs the events of the previous day in her mind in order to recall where she may have mislaid it. In the course of that day she refused the love of three men and tore up the reconciliation letter of a fourth. She discovers, finally, that the purse was stolen by the janitress of her apartment building who wants it to give to her niece, a young girl who needs nice things. Through the cruel insinuations of the janitress that the narrator would not be needing the purse because she has

already lived her life, the narrator comes to the conclusion that the real thief is herself who will leave her with nothing.

Mrs. Treadwell's realization that this is her own situation comes about half way through the novel as she recalls her past life:

Well, well, she said, drawing in her head, Life has been in fact quite disagreeable if not sordid in spots. If anybody called me a lady tramp I hope I should not have my feelings hurt. Nasty things have happened to me often and they were every one my own fault. I put myself in their way, not even knowing they were there, at first. And later when I knew, I always thought, But this is not real, of course. This is not Life naturally. This is just an accident, like being hit by a truck, or trapped in a burning house, or held up and robbed or even murdered maybe--not the common fate of persons like me. . . . (p. 208)

In this scene she at once admits and denies that her life has really been the way it was. It is her habit of denying that the past and the present exist in reality that leads her, during the masquerade, to disguise herself as a member of the Spanish dancing company so that Danny, in his drunkenness, mistakes her for Pastora. As a result, the violent scene in which she beats his face with the spiked heel of her slipper occurs. But this scene comes about only after Mrs. Treadwell has refused the advances of a young ship's officer; again she is the victim of her own self-betrayal, and the reality of the present is too unpleasant for her to face. Of all those caught in the dilemmas of society and in the grip of their own folly, the greatest fool is the one who betrays himself by refusing love.

#### IV.

How, then, does Ship of Fools stand up to the charges that have been made against it? Is the style, as Brom Weber and Theodore Solotaroff suggest, muddled and deteriorated? Is there, as Solotaroff claims, no effective principle of change operating on the action or on the main characters or on the ideas, making the characters predictable and dull? Worst of all,

has Katherine Anne Porter, as she practices her art in her first novel, turned from a woman of compassion for the human condition into a misanthrope bent on castigating the entire human race?

With a novel such as Ship of Fools, to answer one of these charges is to answer them all; for the style is always appropriate to the characters, and the characters always operate in a way that is appropriate to the theme or intent of the novel. In the novel Miss Porter demonstrates the same control of her style that she had in the best of her stories. The most notable feature of her technique is her ability to get inside any or all of her characters and see the action from several points of view at once. Of her technique in Ship of Fools, she has said, "I am nowhere and everywhere. I am the Captain and the seasick bulldog and the man in the cherry-colored shirt . . . and the devilish children and all the women and lots of the men . . ." <sup>67</sup> This is, in fact, what she means when she says, in the preface to the novel already cited, "I am a passenger on that ship." Thus, when as effect of humor is her intent, it is the characters who think or behave in a humorous way; the same holds true for bitterness, moroseness, cynicism, and despair. The tone of the style is always appropriate to what the particular character is thinking and doing at a particular time. Any charge that Miss Porter, as author, is cynical or melodramatic is the result of confusion of the author with her characters. All that can be said of Miss Porter, as she manifests herself in the style of the novel, is that she is restrained; and her restraint is the logical result of her intention not to pass moral judgment on the follies of her characters.

It is this very restraint, on Miss Porter's part, that has left her open to the charge that there is no action within the novel and no change

<sup>67</sup>Quoted in Hendrick, p. 6.

within the characters. It is true that the Vera does not sink; indeed, it does not even change course, but the lives of many of the characters on board have been irreversibly altered in the course of the voyage. For how long will the Huttens, for example, be able to maintain the delicate balance of their marriage after Frau Hutten's deliberate rebellion against the authority of her husband? How will Herr Graf and his nephew Johann behave toward one another after the fateful night in which Herr Graf finally relinquishes some of his money in his first unselfish act in years? How will Wilhelm Freytag react to his Jewish wife after being expelled from the Captain's table and after his short-lived and uneventful affair with Jenny? How will Dr. Schumann continue in the course of his life after his encounter with La Condesa? The very fact that Miss Porter raises these questions is proof enough that there is action and there is change in many of the characters. As Captain Thiele himself expresses to Dr. Schumann on the morning after the masquerade, "This has been an unusually eventful voyage--" (p. 472).

Some of the characters, however, are guilty of the charge of being predictable; and their presence is a flaw in the novel's structure. Frau Rittersdorf and Frau Schmitt are examples of this. They are victims, primarily, of Miss Porter's bias against the Germans as a race; their characterizations have been subordinated to the satire that Miss Porter intends against the German characteristic of willingly subordinating oneself to authority. Wherever Miss Porter is guilty of this sin against her characters, the effectiveness of the novel suffers. As for the other main characters, who, on meeting Dr. Schumann at the beginning of the novel, could have predicted his falling in love, contrary to all his rigid moral principles, with the "lost soul," La Condesa? Who could have predicted that the Captain, the very incarnation of German love for order and dis-

cipline, would allow himself to be ejected from his own table as the result of insults hurled at him by some of his most disreputable passengers? Finally, who could have predicted that Mrs. Treadwell, who, in one of the novel's earliest scenes, could not bring herself to rebuke a beggar-woman for pinching her violently on the arm because she could not believe such a thing could really happen to her, would turn into a mock-picaro of the Spanish dancing company, flailing away at a man twice her size and beating him into unconsciousness? Yet in none of these examples is the action of the character unmotivated. Clearly the charge of predictability and dullness have no foundation in the more interesting of Miss Porter's characters?

As a compilation of the follies of men who are themselves caught in the midst of social upheaval, Ship of Fools is a conventional satire; as an examination into the psychological causes for these follies and into the effect on the individual of living in a chaotic society, Ship of Fools is the most modern of novels, containing all that a first-rate American author, Katherine Anne Porter, has to say on the human condition and on the "majestic and terrible failure of the life of man in the Western world.

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This checklist is intended to supplement the critical bibliography of Edward Schwartz, published in 1953 (see below, II, A), which covers all editions of the stories in addition to all the criticism written on Miss Porter up to that time. The only primary sources included here are the standard editions of the stories, the novel and excerpts, and uncollected stories and statements on writing by Miss Porter published since 1953. This list does not include several of her critical articles written since 1953, because they have no bearing on her fiction. The list of secondary sources is as complete as it is possible to make it at this time.

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ORDER, FORM AND STATEMENT  
IN KATHERINE ANNE PORTER'S SHIP OF FOOLS

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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With the publication in March, 1962, of her first novel, Ship of Fools, Katherine Anne Porter culminated a project that had occupied her attention, off and on, for thirty years. During that time she published three volumes of collected short stories, the style and technique of which drew so much acclaim from critics that, even before the novel, Miss Porter was ranked among the most prominent contemporary American authors. The critical success of her stories and the length of time she took to produce her first novel led to a literary phenomenon: a first novel guaranteed serious attention from virtually all reviewers before its publication. The critics and the public, after all, had ample reason to expect a masterpiece from the author of "Flowering Judas" and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider."

After the first wave of enthusiasm from various reviewers had subsided, some critics found that Ship of Fools, far from living up to their expectations, is a complete failure as a novel. Their charge against it is that the characters are presented in their entirety in the early pages and do not undergo any kind of a dramatic moral or psychological change; the characters, therefore, and the scenes in which they appear are repetitious and monotonous. Furthermore, as a statement on the human condition, Ship of Fools presents a world-view of man dominated by the evil within himself, with no apparent hope of redemption. The failure is due either to a weakening of Miss Porter's hold on her style or to her inherent antipathy for humanity, or both.

The charge is the result of several misunderstandings about the intention of the novel and about Miss Porter's over-all intention as an artist. Ship of Fools, first of all, is written in a specific form--

an imitation of a Medieval convention that has as its purpose satire of the vices and follies of humanity--which must be considered in judging it as a novel; for this form accounts both for the episodic structure and for the emphasis on the operation of evil within the characters.

The clue to an understanding of her artistic intention lies in a statement she makes in her preface to the 1940 edition of Flowering Judas and Other Stories. In it she explains that her stories are "fragments of a much larger plan" of hers and that they comprise her contributions up to that time in the way of "order and form and statement" towards an attempt "to understand the logic of this majestic and terrible failure of the life of man in the Western world." Her novel, then, must be considered as part of her over-all intention as an artist. The parts of her "larger plan," furthermore, are interrelated; and as a result many of the themes of the short stories can be found recurring in the novel as well. From these, a central theme emerges of which all the themes of the stories and the novel can be seen as variations: the individual struggling to create or to find for himself order and personal integrity in a chaotic society and, in doing so, to preserve his identity with his own way of life--whether that way be artistic, professional, or moral.

Ship of Fools, considered both in the context of Miss Porter's fiction and in the ways in which it adds to the "ship of fools" literary convention, is a failure neither as a novel nor as a work of art; it is, rather, a major contribution to contemporary American literature.