



Katherine Anne Porter and the Southwest

FOR MOST OF HER LIFE (1890–1980) Katherine Anne Porter's relationship with her native state was a complex and strained one, characterized by mistrust and suspicion on both sides. She felt that she was a prophet without honor in her own country, and her own country in turn felt that by living abroad and finding the stuff of her fiction elsewhere she had failed to do it honor.¹

When Texans did make gestures of homage towards her, she was delighted. Often, however, the gestures were not carried through. Thus, when she thought in 1939 that her book *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (which comprised, besides the title story, "Old Mortality" and "Noon Wine") might win the award given by the Texas Institute of Letters for the best book by a Texas writer, she was bitterly disappointed. The prize went instead to a favorite son, J. Frank Dobie, because of the "indigenous nature" of his subject matter. Her anger at that time was reactivated years later when her expectation that the University of Texas in Austin was going to name a library for her proved unfounded. The pattern of hope and disappointment created by such incidents increased Porter's tendency to swing between alienation and reconciliation in her attitude towards her birth-state. She often turned against it in disgust, but she always yearned for a final reconciliation.

Such an eventuality seemed likely when, in her eighty-sixth year, Porter received an invitation from Howard Payne University to accept an honorary doctor's degree and to be the guest speaker at a banquet in her honor. Porter's satisfaction in this invitation was very great because Howard Payne University is situated in Brownwood near the now-defunct town of Indian Creek where she was born. The visit was a joyous homecoming, the high point of which for Porter was her visit to her mother's grave in the Indian Creek cemetery.² After her own death, three years later, Porter's physical remains were brought back, according to her wishes, and placed in her mother's grave. It seemed that she had really come home at last. Her large and important literary archive, however, was willed to the Katherine Anne Porter Room at the University of Maryland's McKeldin Library, and it is there that Porter scholars must do their research. This two-fold disposition of her remains correctly indicates that the ambivalences of a lifetime were never finally resolved.

To a large extent, the source of her dissatisfaction with her native place lay in the complex personal problems of her early life. Her childhood was a time of great unhappiness, blighted by material and emotional deprivation after the death of her mother when she was two, with her sufferings aggravated by her extreme sensitivity. When she reviewed her early life she found it impossible to accept the circumstances of her childhood—that she was Callie Porter, one of five children, born in a log house to an impoverished dirt farmer and raised in a fundamentalist religious atmosphere.

She was impelled by a strange necessity to recreate her childhood and fabricate a heritage more suited to her personality and her talents. In both her fictional and autobiographical accounts she described herself as the descendant of a line of distinguished American statesmen. She did not claim affluence but chose to indicate that she was raised in the decayed splendor of an earlier age. She described family mansions falling into disrepair, libraries well stocked with fusty books, and former slaves bound to the family by ties of loyalty and affection rather than by material rewards.

Students of her work had trouble locating the scenes of her early life. When she spoke of herself as a member of the guilt-ridden white pillar crowd, they wondered if the white pillars, more common in the eastern states of the South than in Texas, were those of Austin, San Marcos, and San Antonio. They were not. When Porter described the stately homes of her childhood in fiction and in autobiography, she transferred to the small towns of the blackland farming country the ample homes she knew during a five-month period of retreat on the islands of Bermuda. The Porters' small house in Kyle was replaced in her accounts by Hilgrove, the ancestral home of the Hollis family of Bailey's Bay. The Porters' shack in the country between Buda and Mountain City was replaced by the Hollises' house, Cedar Grove.³

From time to time, Porter did write in a realistic vein about the Texas she really knew. Austere towns like Salem, Massachusetts and Basle, Switzerland for some reason evoked the mood of the hard life of the Texas farmer, and in these places she wrote "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall," "He," and "Noon Wine."

Critics were quick to note the vividness of these fictions and they praised Porter for her ability to make the imaginative leap from her own aristocratic background to the humbler world of the Plain People.⁴ The leap, however, was in the reverse direction, from the Plain People she knew to the imagined aristocratic world of Miranda Gay.

It is a measure of her inability to reconcile herself to her own background that she has no fictional representative in her stories of the Plain People and no character with whom she closely identifies. The characters of "Noon Wine" were based on members of her own family, and they were so

easily recognizable (their names were barely changed) that there was talk in the family of a lawsuit. In spite of this closeness to actuality, Porter is careful in her commentary on the story to disclaim kinship with the characters. She writes in "Noon Wine: The Sources":

Let me give you a glimpse of Mr. and Mrs. Thompson, not as they were in their real lives, for I never knew them, but as they have become in my story.

The woman I have called Mrs. Thompson—I never knew her name—⁵

So great was her discomfort with this whole area of her experience that she compared the job of explaining the sources of "Noon Wine" to the gruesome process of having one's spinal fluid tapped.⁶

Porter's attitude, then, to her postage stamp of native soil was shot through with ambivalence. Yet for all that, there was one part of her birth-right about which she was perfectly straight and uncomplicated in her mind. She loved and cherished her native tongue, and the language she claimed was not the English language in general, nor American English in particular, but very specifically the language which was spoken in central Texas during the last part of the nineteenth and the first part of the twentieth century. She told of returning to that part of the state when she was in her middle years and of listening to the speech with a joyful shock of recognition:

And did I not tell you about standing at the edge of a field and listening to an old man, leaning on a plow, a childhood friend of my father's, talking, and how I said to myself, Why, that is my own speech, that is what I was born to; oh, I might have lost it if I had waited much longer to hear it again! For it was the oldest and most beautiful speech of the south, stately, literate, idiomatic, aristocratic; dignity and gentleness itself, strong without emphasis, pleasant, human. The speech of my own people, from England and Ireland to Kentucky to Texas: and it was spoken by a man in ragged blue jeans, toothless and old, tired and solitary, who had come to it was [sic] his fate, and he knew it without thinking about it. . . .⁷

In 1978, when R. G. Vliet accepted a prize from the Texas Institute of Letters for his novel, *Solitudes*, he used the occasion to discuss the characteristics of a literature of the Southwest. Quite naturally, he spoke of the language in which such a literature would be written and also quite naturally he devoted part of his address to a description of Porter's language. He correctly discerned the difference in tone which exists between Porter's

stories “Old Mortality” and “Noon Wine,” but he ascribed that cleavage to the geographical and linguistic divide on which Porter spent her formative years after she left Indian Creek:

As you drive toward Austin through, for instance, Kyle, the town where Katherine Anne Porter was raised by an archetypal grandmother and where much of her early fiction is set, the boundary is palpable. On your right is the rich, black, softly rolling cotton-farmland of the South, on your left the leading edge of the rocky, cedar and post-oak, ranch-section Hill Country. There is very nearly a clean division in idiom there too: toward the right the soft, drawling pronunciation general to the South, to the left the brusque, consonantal harshness understood as “western” that so reflects the harsher landscape. This accounts for the difficulty we sometimes have in deciding whether Katherine Anne Porter in her early fiction is in fact writing about the *South* or the *Southwest*. In her great short novel, *Noon Wine*, she is writing about the Southwest. In *Old Mortality* and in the series of sketches in *The Old Order*, she is writing about the South. South and Southwest ran simultaneously through her childhood, right there in Kyle.⁸

While conceding the accuracy of Vliet’s description of the distinction between the speech of the South and that of the Southwest, I would like to take issue with his extension of that distinction to the language of Porter. It is true that the difference of subject matter and social setting that separates “Old Mortality” from “Noon Wine” calls forth some different linguistic usages. But it is my contention that the linguistic differences between the two stories are slight and that the strength of Porter’s distinctive idiom in all her work derives from her combining and harmonizing of the qualities of the speech of both the South and the Southwest, as Vliet has defined those qualities.

It seems to me, moreover, that the unique combination of soft lyricism with harsh brusqueness is a marked feature not only of Porter’s writing but of her own physical voice and of her conversation. Porter’s voice, immortalized in numerous recordings, has always taxed the descriptive powers of commentators. It has been described as breathy, velvety and drawling and at the same time as having a certain hoarseness. The hoarseness has sometimes been attributed to the recurrent bouts of bronchitis from which she suffered. But is it not possible that these health problems simply aggravated a regional trait?

During her lifetime, Porter was valued not only as a writer and reader

of her own stories but among her friends as a peerless conversationalist. Lady Bird Johnson said that her conversation was as flawless as her writing,⁹ and the poet Raymond Roseliep described her as the most colorful conversationalist he had ever met because her image-making facility was so alive.¹⁰

A feature of her speech and a source of much amusement to her listeners was the extent to which she drew upon the colloquial and racy expressions of her local dialect. Because conversation is by nature occasional and evanescent I should like to convey the flavor of her diction by quoting from a letter written by one of her guests who was invited for a goose dinner, because “honey—if you ain’t got a gaggle of friends around, it just ain’t worth the time worrying about a goose.” As it happened, not only was the goose undercooked, but the keys to the deep freeze and the wine cellar had been misplaced and the elegantly served dinner turned out to be catastrophic:

After she had cut a slice or two and served the stuffing with a lovely silver spoon, she noted that the closer she got to the center of the critter, the rawer it looked. She quietly put down the silver spoon, looked around her . . . and said “Well babies, we got store bought bread, and we ain’t got but half enough wine and now this here bird seems to have come out half done and I just pray,” as she reached into the innards of the bird, grabbed a handful of the stuffing and splatted it onto a plate, “that the Good Lord, or whoever is running this God Damned show will shortly put an end to it.” All of this had been delivered by that lovely show piece who was dressed to the nines, was perfectly coiffed and made up and garnished with several yards of pearls and the Porter emeralds.¹¹

The contrasting styles evidenced in this incident informed all her speech and also her writing. In formal addresses she often introduced lively images and expressions with the phrases, “as we say in Texas” and “where I come from they would say. . . .”

“Noon Wine: The Sources” contains extremely lyrical passages and also many colloquialisms that give the flavor of the region she is describing. But these opposites are present in equal measure in *Ship of Fools* as well as in the regional stories. Mr. Hatch is seen in “Noon Wine”

shifting his plug and squirting tobacco juice at a dry-looking little rose bush that was having a hard enough time as it was, standing all day in the blazing sun.¹²

Very close to that style is the description in *Ship of Fools* of David Scott waking up with a crashing hangover:

He slept at last, for an hour, and woke in the horrors of headache fit to crack his skull, a leaping gorge, blazing thirst, and a stomach so estranged it refused to harbor its only friends, aspirin and cold water.¹³

Robert Penn Warren tried to describe this really flexible style for all seasons by contrasting Porter with Machiavelli in his rural retreat at San Casciano when he spent his days with the rustics and at night changed into curial robes before he communed with literature:

The other type of writer is, on the contrary, peculiarly of a piece, less ritualistic if not less devoted. His work is a mere extension, in a direct and fairly innocent way, of his being. . . . This is the sort of writer Katherine Anne Porter is. She has no curial robes, and without bothering to change her muddy shoes, she may speak quite wittily or wisely to the rustics.¹⁴

It is the mark of a significant artist that he uses his medium in a highly individualistic fashion. Porter's language, accordingly, is her own distinct possession, quite unlike that of any other writer. Nevertheless, she uses the regional speech to which she was born as the basis of her own individual style. In doing so, she not only exploits the virtues of that speech for her own purpose, but in turn extends it for others. Later writers using the same speech find it richer for her having used it. And indeed, Porter's influence on other Texas writers has been great and has been acknowledged by them. William Humphrey in paying homage to her influence has mentioned particularly that he learned something about language from her. When he sent her a copy of his novel, *Home from the Hill*, he wrote in it that she taught him the most important thing that one writer could teach another, that for a writer the place and the life and the speech to which he was born were his place and his subject and his speech. He had told her earlier that her being from Texas was the important thing for him.

In spite, then, of her tortured relationships with Texas, Porter remains an important part of the literary tradition of Texas and of the Southwest. Porter herself saw her position as that of a pioneer, and she wrote of it boastfully to the President of Howard Payne University. It is somehow characteristic that she could not let slip the opportunity while she was on the subject to make a dig at her long-time rival, J. Frank Dobie, who she felt had often (and unjustly) usurped the prominent place she deserved in the state's estimation:

I happen to be the first native of Texas in its whole history to be a professional writer. That is to say, one who had the vocation and practiced only that and lived by and for it all my life. We have

had a good many lately in the last quarter of the century perhaps and we have had many people who wrote memoirs and saved many valuable stories and have written immensely interesting and valuable things about Texas: and they are to be valued and understood. But I am very pleased that I am the first who ever was born to the practice of literature. . . .¹⁵

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Notes

1. Joan Givner, "Katherine Anne Porter's Texas," *Vision: The Magazine of the Public Communications Foundation for North Texas* 2 (September 1979): 18–22. This article gives a fuller account of Porter's relationship with Texas.
2. Joan Givner, "A Fine Day of Homage to Porter," *The Dallas Morning News*, Sunday, May 23rd, 1976, p. 5G. This article describes Porter's visit to Howard Payne University in Brownwood.
3. Joan Givner, "'The Plantation of This Isle': Katherine Anne Porter's Bermuda Base," *Southwest Review* 62 (Autumn 1978): 339–51.
4. Mark Schorer, "Afterword" in Katherine Anne Porter, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (New York: Signet, 1967), pp. 167–75.
5. Katherine Anne Porter, *The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings of Katherine Anne Porter* (New York: Dell, 1973), pp. 478, 481.
6. *The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings*, p. 468.
7. Letter from Katherine Anne Porter to William Goyen, May 28, 1951.
8. R. G. Vliet, "On a Literature of the Southwest: An Address," *The Texas Observer*, April 28, 1978, p. 19.
9. Letter from Lady Bird Johnson to Joan Givner, December 7, 1977.
10. Letter from Reverend Raymond Roseliep to Joan Givner, November 19, 1978.
11. Letter from Lt. Commander William R. Wilkins to Joan Givner, July 10, 1980.
12. Katherine Anne Porter, *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1965), p. 249.

13. Katherine Anne Porter, *Ship of Fools* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1962), p. 475.
14. Robert Penn Warren, "Introduction" to Edward Schwartz, "Katherine Anne Porter: A Critical Bibliography," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 57 (May 1953).
15. Letter from Katherine Anne Porter to President Roger Brooks of Howard Payne University, October 7, 1975.

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- Demouy, Jane Krause. *Katherine Anne Porter's Women: The Eye of Her Fiction*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982. A reappraisal of Porter's work and interpretation of many of her stories by focusing on the women characters.
- Givner, Joan. *Katherine Anne Porter: A Life*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982. The definitive biography.
- Hardy, John Edward. *Katherine Anne Porter*. New York: Ungar, 1978. A balanced and useful full-length study of Porter's works.
- Hendrick, George. *Katherine Anne Porter*. New York: Twayne, 1965. The earliest full-length study of Porter's work, this remains a useful tool with sensible readings of her stories and of *Ship of Fools*.
- Kieran, Robert F. *Katherine Anne Porter and Carson McCullers: A Reference Guide*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1976. The most comprehensive listing of Porter's collected and uncollected works, this is an indispensable book for students of Porter's work.
- Warren, Robert Penn, ed. *Katherine Anne Porter: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1979. It is unfortunate that this handbook in a series on which students depend contains so much material that is not useful. The biographical introduction is totally misleading and seven of the essays appear in *Katherine Anne Porter: A Critical Symposium*. The remaining selections are valuable—a sampling of the early reviews of *Ship of Fools* and a reprinting of the important interview, "A County and Some People I Love" by Hank Lopez from *Harper's*, September, 1965.