

BRIEF MENTIONS

MICHAEL KREYLING

Eudora Welty's Achievement of Order

Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press. Pp. 188. \$20.00

It has become almost traditional for critics of Eudora Welty to begin by invoking the name of Katherine Anne Porter and by citing the mutual admiration of the two distinguished writers, as evidenced by the series of formal gestures they made to each other over the years. Porter wrote the introduction to Welty's first collection of stories. In gratitude Welty dedicated her second book to her friend. Later Welty wrote an appreciative critical essay on Porter's technique. Its title "The Eye of the Story" eventually became the title of Welty's collection of her essays and reviews.

For all that, the private reservations entertained by the two writers about each other are more interesting than the public pronouncements. The efforts of Welty and her publisher to extract the introductory essay to *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories* from the procrastinating Porter were long and tortured, and when the essay was done Welty never quite understood it or figured out Porter's readings of her stories, as she admitted in an interview with the present writer. Porter for her part was a severe critic of Welty, whom she thought an uneven writer. She disliked *The Ponder Heart* and deplored what she considered to be the stylistic extravagances of *Delta Wedding* and *The Golden Apples*. When she read *The Golden Apples* she said that her friend was drunk on language, that her technical virtuosity had gone into a dizzy spin and that her personal showing off was as shameless as that of a circus performer.

If, however, their public exchanges of compliments are misleading, there is still a usefulness in linking the two names. It lies in the lesson to be learned by Welty critics from the history of Porter criticism.

During her lifetime Porter was often described by journalists as "the First Lady of American Letters." While Porter herself scorned the phrase for its vulgarity, it ac-

curately described her preeminence. It is, in fact, not the name but the position which is regrettable, since it places the writer and her work in a false light.

For many years, Porter's critics adopted the attitude of knights defending a gallant lady and vying with each other in serving her. Her work was evaluated not with discrimination, but in terms of exaggerated praise. She was compared with Dante (by Caroline Gordon), with Milton (by Glenway Wescott) and with Melville, Hawthorne, and Henry James (by Paul Rosenfeld). Not only was such adulation directed at her fiction, but her ubiquitous presence on the lecture circuit made her the object of personal devotion. She was hailed for her worldly wisdom, magnanimity, and political astuteness and courage.

The appearance of *Ship of Fools* provided a change in the climate but did not restore perspective since, in literary criticism as in politics, one kind of extremism breeds another. With her production of a best seller—the literary equivalent of marrying a shipping magnate—she was censored for her political naïveté, her racism, and misanthropy. The result of both the extreme adulation and the extreme hostility was that fifty years of literary criticism failed to provide a clear and dispassionate view of her work as a whole and to place it in the larger context of American literature.

The state of Porter's critical affairs is highly relevant to the career of Eudora Welty who has replaced her friend as First Lady. She is frequently present on the platforms of University lecture halls and convocation ceremonies. She is the recipient of many honors and prizes and most recently of the President's Freedom Medal. Not surprisingly, the review by her friend Robert Penn Warren in the *New York Times Book Review* of three recent books on Welty carries the title "Under the Spell of Eudora."

Michael Kreyling's *Eudora Welty's Achievement of Order* is one of the three. It is the first critical work to include Welty's later novels, *Losing Battles* and *The Optimist's Daughter* and it might, therefore, be ex-

pected to attempt an overall assessment of the subject and to place the work in some kind of critical context. That it fails to do so is largely the result of the writer's extreme veneration for his subject and his readiness to accept her own critical precepts at face value. His critical excesses include the comparison of *The Robber Bridegroom* with *The Blithedale Romance* and *The Great Gatsby*; *The Optimist's Daughter* with *To the Lighthouse*; and the very uneven *Losing Battles* with *War and Peace*, *The Tempest* and the novels of Jane Austen. His transports recall exactly the outbursts which greeted Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* collection in 1938.

In his "Afterword," Kreyling explains Welty's suspicion of certain critical methods: "Literary analytics," in her view, is not the most advantageous approach for her reader because it sacrifices the experience of discovering the 'thing made' to the convenience of having it presented by a previous reader who has tagged and judged each part" (p. 175). Her defensiveness at the prospect of thematic and technical analysis is entirely understandable. It is less understandable that her critic should, as Kreyling does, echo her words: "Analytical or argumentative criticism—any approach that is dogmatic—seems inappropriate to her work. It is not that Welty's prose is muddled or murky (the argument that her style is obscure is easily countered), and not that the readers are muddled and murky either. But the fiction, taken as individual works or as a corpus, is so integral that taking it piece by piece, moment by moment, cannot duplicate the sense of wholeness one continues to enjoy in reading it" (p. XV).

For a writer as allusive and indirect as Welty, it is particularly important to identify the recurrent themes that inform all her work. It seems to me that analysis might well begin with "A Memory" (1937), a short story which encapsulates the central theme that appears later in more complex ways, and which thus stands in the same relationship to Welty's entire oeuvre as does "Ethan Brand" to Hawthorne's, "Theft" to Katherine Anne Porter's, and "A Clean Well-Lighted Place" to Hemingway's.

In "A Memory," the field marks are clearly set out, the polarities of Welty's world fixed. On the one hand is the solitary girl who is an artist of sorts. On the other is a family whose members rival each

other in vulgarity, brutishness, and physical ugliness. Repeatedly in Welty's fiction married pairs and family groups are presented as antithetical to artistic creation, spiritually, and sensitivity.

The girl of "A Memory" is also experiencing first love, a non-physical idealized attraction for a classmate who is described as masculine. The climax of the story occurs when the classmate starts suddenly to bleed from the nose. The girl is so shocked by the sight of the blood that she falls into a dead faint. The story is an account of the terrifying threat to a young girl's world and her values by the approach of mature sexuality, the physical necessities of her own body, and the prospect of becoming an adult member of a family group. Porter well understood the power of this story when she described her own personal preference for "this particular kind of story, where the external act and the internal voiceless life of the human imagination almost meet and mingle on the mysterious threshold between dream and waking, one reality refusing to admit or confirm the existence of the other, yet both conspiring toward the same end" (*The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings of Katherine Anne Porter* [New York: Delacorte Press, 1970], p. 289).

In some of her later novels, like *Losing Battles* and *The Optimist's Daughter*, Welty worked towards a dramatic rather than a poetic mode of presenting her theme. These works seem to me less successful and less powerful than such richly poetic treatments as *The Golden Apples* and *Delta Wedding*. It is, however, difficult to assess *Losing Battles* which is a potentially fine novel badly in need of editorial pruning.

The point to be made is that while Kreyling's book contains a great deal of indubitably useful material, particularly in his explanations of the mythic patterns in Welty's work, it suffers from his disinclination to take a firm grasp of her main themes. Related to this is his unwillingness to discuss the weaknesses as well as the strengths of Welty's art. Certainly Welty's work is technically brilliant, beautifully poetic, and charming. But does she ever, one wonders, get beyond presenting a series of adolescents looking in disgust at the adult world. Is her ability to create a fairy-tale world not simply at the service of presenting a sort of Child's Christmas in Mississippi? These are the kinds of critical problems that Katherine Anne Porter, for

example, was aware of and Kreyling's failure to engage himself in a rigorously critical spirit with his subject compromises his work. His book leaves too many problems unsolved and too many questions unasked.

Joan Givner

TAYAMA KATAI

*The Quilt and Other Stories by
Tayama Katai*

Translated and with an
introduction by Kenneth G.
Henshall

Tokyo: University of Tokyo
Press, 1981. Pp. 204. ¥ 2800

Tayama Katai (1872-1930) is well known in Japan as one of the leading figures in the naturalist movement, even though not all of his works could be called "naturalist."

Westerners usually associate the term "naturalist literature" with the concepts of industrial revolution, urbanization, and the misery of the working classes. Milieu and heredity were considered the determining factors in people's lives; writers "dissected" their heroes like doctors would a corpse. Like scientists, writers wanted to discover "the truth" about man. In Europe, authors like Zola, Gerhart Hauptmann or Arno Holz showed how limited man's so-called free will in reality was: life was determined by biological factors and by society.

In Japan, this new school of thought took roots almost immediately; since Japan had opened her doors to Western ideas and technology in 1868, everything Western was avidly studied and discussed. In most cases, however, this process of assimilation also meant modification. The idea that social pressures and the forces of a specific milieu regulated one's life was not at all new or shocking in Japan. However, that an individual should put up a fight against those forces, that the prevailing social and moral order might be defied—these were shocking thoughts indeed. Because of this, naturalist writers in Japan often told their novels in the first-person singular; almost all of their works are, to some extent, autobiographical. Japanese writers explored the forces of nature in themselves, not so much those in their environment.

Tayama inaugurated that trend in 1907 with *Futon* ("The Quilt")—the story which brought him lasting success and which appropriately opens the present collection. At first, it seems a rather banal story: Tokio, an author who earns his living by working half time in a drab office, takes on a pupil. The beautiful girl wants to become a writer herself; she has been educated in a modern school and has modern ideas about life. Tokio falls in love with her, but does not succumb to his passion. The girl then takes a lover, pretending to her teacher that it is a "pure" relationship. Should Tokio notify her parents? "He could not bring himself to make a sacrifice of his beloved's passionate love affair for the sake of his own unreasonable jealousy and his own improper feelings of love, and at the same time, as their self-styled 'kind-hearted guardian,' he couldn't bear to deal with them like some moralist" (p. 69). Finally, however, his responsibility weighs too heavily on him. He notifies her father, who takes her home with him—far away into a snowy mountain village. Tokio then goes to the girl's old room where he "spread out the mattress, lay the quilt out on it, and wept as he buried his face against the cold, stained, velvet edging" (p. 96).

To appreciate this story properly, one has to take into account that in Japan the teacher-pupil relationship has always been a venerable one. In "The Quilt," this social and moral relationship is destroyed by passions. And the reason for those passionate feelings is the Westernization of Japan. The teacher, his pupil, and her lover have all given in to Western influences: Western literature, Western education, Western life style. The story does not challenge the order of society; rather it shows how individual desires—the result of Western influences—create conflict and suffering.

There are seven other stories: six written between 1907 and 1914, one in 1902. The later ones all hold the reader's interest; the earlier one, however, is rather boring, although it is said to be Tayama's "most successful work to date" (p. 16). A final word of praise for Kenneth G. Henshall, editor and translator: the translations are competent and a pleasure to read; the selection gives a good idea of Tayama's development; the detailed introduction provides the necessary perspectives—with regard to the literary scene in Japan as well as to that in Europe.

Ingrid Schuster