

KATHERINE ANNE PORTER'S FICTION:
MAN IN A FALLING WORLD

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KATHERINE ANNE PORTER'S FICTION:
MAN IN A FALLING WORLD

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By

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CHAPTER I

SHIP OF FOOLS IN CONTEXT

During the several decades before 1960 Katherine Anne Porter was known only as the author of some very good stories and short novels.¹ Her work was recognized as continuing the tradition of finely wrought fictional artistry that included such touchstones as Gustave Flaubert's "A Simple Heart," Henry James' "The Beast in the Jungle," and James Joyce's "The Dead." But these predecessors also wrote Madame Bovary, The Ambassadors, and Ulysses; they were masters of the novel as well as the shorter forms of fiction. The same could not be said of Porter until 1962, when, in her seventy-second year, she published her first novel, Ship of Fools.

In an interview in 1965 Porter described the ease with which three of her short novels were written: ". . . all of a sudden, it's like an egg forming, they were ready to go."²

¹In the introduction to The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter (New York, 1965), Porter writes: "I beg of the reader one gentle favor for which he may be sure of my perpetual gratitude: please do not call my short novels Novellettes, or even worse, Novellas. Novellette is classical usage for a trivial, dime-novel sort of thing; Novella is a slack, boneless, affected word that we do not need to describe anything" (p. vi).

²Frank Lopez and Katherine Anne Porter. "A Country and Some People I Love," Harper's Magazine, CCXXXI (September, 1965), 66.

She wrote the first one, "Old Mortality," in seven days, the second, "Noon Wine," in another seven days, and, six months later, the third, "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," in nine days.

The writing of Ship of Fools, however, was another matter:

At first I tried to make a short novel out of it. . . . Ship of Fools was to be the fourth in a group, but the story simply got away from me. I fought it to a standstill, too, but it finally won. It took twenty-one years to get it written and I quit every chance I had, but it finally won.³

Porter's battle was not only with the form of the novel, but also with a number of interruptions, some lasting for as long as five years. At first, as she explained, she "simply sat down in the middle of July or August. I think it was 1942.

. . . And all of a sudden my mind cleared. In about six weeks I wrote the first forty-eight pages of that novel."⁴

Then, over a twenty-year period, interruption followed interruption, and yet the novel remained clear in her mind:

Sometimes I was interrupted in the middle of a paragraph with all kinds of things. You know how life is. I've never had any protection or margin, nor any buffer between me and the economic grimness of life. So I would leave it in the middle of a paragraph and maybe not get back to it for months. I said once upon a time, "This story has been cracked and mended in a hundred places. And does it show?" And someone said, "If you hadn't told me I wouldn't have known it wasn't one piece." Well, it was one piece in my mind. But getting it down on paper was the hardest thing I ever did in my life.⁵

³James Ruoff and Del Smith, "Katherine Anne Porter on Ship of Fools," College English, XXIV (February, 1963), 396.

⁴Lopez and Porter, p. 66.

⁵Ibid.

What Porter wished to get "down on paper" was the idea of a "ship of this world on its voyage to eternity--a very ancient image,"⁶ an image taken, as she explains in the novel's introductory note, from Sebastian Brant's moral allegory, Das Narrenschiff. It is a concept "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."⁷ Actually the voyage had a very real counterpart in Porter's life, her first trip to Europe, and, like the fictional ship, hers started from Veracruz and went to Bremerhaven in 1931. In 1961, the year before the novel's publication, she recalled that literal trip:

The voyage lasted twenty-eight days. Aboard ship were a half dozen nationalities and as many castes and religions. . . . On that ship I was stuck with people I never dreamed existed. . . . I was stuck with an inescapable humanity. . . . That ship was like a basket of snakes on a hot stove. People were drawn together by religion, separated by language or nationality; drawn together by nationality, separated by caste or politics.⁸

When she arrived at Bremerhaven, she sent her diary of the voyage to a friend in the form of a long letter, which was later returned and used in the writing of the novel; in

⁶Ruoff and Smith, p. 396.

⁷Katherine Anne Porter, Ship of Fools (Boston, 1962), p. vii .

⁸Ruoff and Smith, p. 396.

Berlin she wrote a poem about the voyage which was not published until 1957.⁹

Ship of Fools was finally published in April of 1962, after three months of uninterrupted work. It received the predicted acclaim due "the high priestess of the short story."¹⁰ One review announced that "the Great American novel has appeared."¹¹ Such enthusiasm is short-lived, however, and followed by criticism that grows increasingly vituperative; the initial applause is explained away as "due to a sentimental aura surrounding Southern literature, including Miss Porter's short stories."¹² Much of the early praise does appear to be drawn from admiration of Porter's previous work and her long-standing reputation as an artist of the first rank. Sybille Bedford, while acknowledging that Ship of Fools is a masterpiece, cannot help finding fault. "The novel remains static, the characters move on treadmills towards crescendos, not towards development; there is accumulation, straws on camels' backs, but no choice, no

⁹Katherine Anne Porter, "After a Long Journey," Mademoiselle, XLVI (November, 1957), 142-143.

¹⁰Lodwick Hartley, "Dark Voyagers: A Study of Katherine Anne Porter's Ship of Fools," The University Review--Kansas City, XXX (Fall, 1963), 84.

¹¹Sybille Bedford, "Voyage to Everywhere," The Spectator, November 16, 1962, p. 763.

¹²Jean Alexander, "Katherine Anne Porter's Ship in the Jungle," Twentieth Century Literature, XI (January, 1966), 179.

crossroads, no turning points."¹³ Smith Kirkpatrick applauds what others damn, namely, the so-called flat characterization: ". . . the passengers tend to develop more towards caricature than characterization. And this is very close to Miss Porter's point."¹⁴ Although his aim is to compliment, Kirkpatrick finds himself, nonetheless, saying that "the novel comes to no conclusions, answers no questions."¹⁵

Too often the criticism is a mere reprimand of Porter's treatment of the Germans, or the Jews, or the Americans, depending upon the particular critic. Theodore Solotaroff rebukes the novel as "the most sour and morbid indictment of humanity to appear in years."¹⁶ And yet he wishes Porter had conveyed the "active evil in the character of German nationalism"¹⁷ with more force and given the Jew Lowenthal more sympathy. The novel, he concludes, "is simply what it is: an account of a tedious voyage to Europe three decades ago that has been labored over for twenty years by a writer who, late in life, is venturing, hence, revealing, little more than misanthropy and clever technique."¹⁸ Stanley Kauffmann echoes

¹³Bedford, p. 764.

¹⁴Smith Kirkpatrick, "Ship of Fools: Review," The Sewanee Review, LXXI (Winter, 1963), 94.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 98.

¹⁶Theodore Solotaroff, "Ship of Fools and the Critics," Commentary, XXXIV (October, 1962), 282.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 283.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 286.

Solotaroff's disapproval: "The book is . . . less tragic than satiric; but satire against a huge complex of civilization ceases to be satire and becomes misanthropy."¹⁹

Although Ship of Fools has been called dull and unexciting--"the sense of sameness spreads like a yawn"²⁰--the response to it has certainly been lively. The singular conditions surrounding its publication obviously played a part in determining its reception. Promised since 1932, and seen in bits and pieces in publications ranging from Accent to Mademoiselle (under the two rejected titles "Promised Land" and "No Safe Harbor"), and tantalizingly talked about by the author, Porter's first novel became a literary legend even before publication. In a devastating parody of the novel and its legend Peter De Vries imagines an aging publisher desperately waiting for his famous lady author to finish her heralded magnum opus: "It was all very well for the damned unwritten book to be a legend in her lifetime, but his was drawing to a close."²¹ As a final maneuver he offers her fifty thousand dollars for whatever she has written. The lady is very surprised and hastens to correct a

¹⁹Stanley Kauffmann, "Katherine Anne Porter's Crowning Work," The New Republic, April 2, 1962, p. 25.

²⁰Solotaroff, p. 280.

²¹Peter De Vries, "Nobody's Fool (A Character or Two Overlooked in Miss Katherine Anne Porter's Shipload)," The New Yorker, XXXVIII (June 16, 1962), 28.

misunderstanding. She has only been reading a masterpiece, not writing one. While the stricken publisher expires, the lady analyzes the authoress she has been reading: "She's a genius, of course, and genius always has the right to bore us now and then, for the sake of what's ahead. And why does characterization for a woman so often consist in having someone's number."²²

The real Porter does have a gift for "having someone's number," an analytical talent which places her characters in an ironic perspective. This talent is as evident in some of her shorter works as in Ship of Fools; but according to the critics, in the novel it results in a misanthropy not found in the earlier work. It is true that Porter's so-called "Miranda stories," those with Miranda or someone like her as the protagonist, do not, with the notable exception of "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," share the novel's caustic vision of the human condition, and thus it is no wonder that in the context of these "Romantic" stories Ship of Fools "seems cold and cynical."²³ But when we consider the darker, more ironic stories--such as "Maria Concepcion," "Magic," "A Day's Work," "That Tree," and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider"--the novel proves to be a culmination of, not an abandonment of, certain established characteristics. These stories are so straightforward and compact in structure that they may strike the casual

²²Ibid., p. 29.

²³Alexander, p. 179.

reader as superficial, even bland. Technically admirable, they may seem only that--an exercise in artistry without complexity of meaning, which is the major accusation against the novel. Underneath the stylistically perfect and apparently uncomplicated surface, however, are layers of meaning; relationships revolve around each other with a complexity that defies paraphrase. And these "simple" stories prove to be quite profound when carefully read.

In style and theme Ship of Fools is much the same as these darker stories. It dramatizes an uneasy yet inescapable alternation of thoughtless violence and deliberate passiveness. The book, observes John P. McIntyre, "presents 'people who are trying to do right'; they evoke horror in their collective unconcern for wrongdoing. Each character rationalizes his behavior--easily, glibly, even persuasively. And the total effect frightens."²⁴ McIntyre is dealing with the heart of the matter here, for Porter's artistic knife cuts deeply to show humanity dehumanizing itself through rationalization. Rationalization, for Porter, is that which generates an aloofness, a neutrality to others, which, essentially, is an evasion of responsibility. In an interview in 1963 she describes this particularly modern crime:

²⁴John P. McIntyre, "Ship of Fools and Its Publicity," Thought, XXXVIII (Summer, 1963), 212.

Oh, we're convinced we're not evil. We don't believe in that sort of thing, do we? And the strange thing is that if these agents of evil Hitler, Mussolini are all clowns, why do we put up with them? God knows, such men are evil, without sense--forces of pure ambition and will--but they enjoy our tacit consent. . . . So, you see, Ship of Fools is only a tiny drop of water to illustrate this vast ocean of accord. . . . As for all the evil that threatens us now, I must say we haven't an alibi in the world. We have let all this evil come upon us.²⁵

She says further that this consent to evil is "the theme of my novel. And it's not mentioned once in the story. Find it for yourself."²⁶

Much of the shorter fiction portrays a world crumbling into chaos because of the collaboration of society with the moral corruption of its members. Marjorie Ryan, describing the world of Ship of Fools, unintentionally also delineates the themes of the shorter works:

Life . . . is a hazardous affair, however cautiously we try to live it. We walk a tightrope, never more than a step away from possible disaster, so strong and so intimately connected with our need for other people are the primitive impulses of violence and egoism and so thin is the net of civilized behavior that is between us and the pit. Indeed, if in trying to civilize ourselves we have been trying to make order out of chaos, Miss Porter seems to be saying that we have succeeded only in becoming more systematically and efficiently, though less directly, violent; the more definite and clear-cut the code by

²⁵Ruoff and Smith, p. 397.

²⁶Ibid. Porter suggests a thematic emphasis here that this thesis considers at length in Chapter IV; and despite her statement that the "consent to evil" theme is never made explicit, one character does confess, "Our collusion with evil is only negative, consent by default" (Ship of Fools Boston, 1962, p. 294). See also pp. 256, 342, 394, 405, 425, 442.

which we live, the more clearly even our ordinary actions reflect the violence that is only imperfectly submerged and that may erupt savagely and nakedly at any time.²⁷

In the fury of erupting violence the superficial codes and polite emotions are swept away; often, however, such a moment of truth is ignored in the participant's rush to return to his protective shell of rationalization. The Porter character who withdraws within himself, hoping that only his inner resources are enough to live on, is likely to discover he has hoped in vain; the individual cannot flourish for long without at least trying to participate in the moral life of his community.

It has been repeatedly said that Ship of Fools is "not the kind of novel we might have expected Miss Porter to write,"²⁸ and that "by trying to do more, she does infinitely less,"²⁹ that in the light of her shorter works, the novel is a "shamefaced disappointment."³⁰ Carl Bode says that

Ship of Fools lacks the flawlessly finished surface of the three short novels which preceded it. The richness, the decorative beauty of those books is

²⁷Marjorie Ryan, "Katherine Anne Porter: Ship of Fools," Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction, V (Fall, 1962), 94.

²⁸Marjorie Ryan, "Katherine Anne Porter: Ship of Fools and the Short Stories," Bucknell Review, XII (Fall, 1963), 51.

²⁹Daniel Curley, "Katherine Anne Porter: The Larger Plan," The Kenyon Review, XXV (Autumn, 1963), 674.

³⁰Wayne C. Booth, "Yes, But Are They Really Novels?" The Yale Review, LI (Summer, 1962), 634.

gone. So is the mournfully elegant symbolism; it is replaced by a compound of images either too obvious or too vague. So is the sureness of tone of the prior books.³¹

The contention of this thesis is the contrary: Ship of Fools is not a departure from the body of Porter's work which precedes it, but a culmination in theme and technical achievement. Instead of wasting her strength "by trying to do more," she has called upon the artistic experience responsible for the power and force of those stories to expand themes and create her most comprehensive world. The first part of this paper focuses on the shorter works that foreshadow the novel in darkness and complexity; and the analysis of the shorter fiction looks forward to the analysis of Ship of Fools. The second half of this study concentrates on the novel itself in an attempt to explicate its particular vision.

³¹Carl Bode, "Katherine Anne Porter, Ship of Fools," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, III (Fall, 1952), 90.

CHAPTER II

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A PATTERN IN THE SHORTER FICTION

In 1922, exactly forty years before the publication of her first novel, Katherine Anne Porter published her first story, "Maria Concepcion," which contains elements so vital to her view of the human condition that they appear four decades later in Ship of Fools. The story is thus, in several ways, the first step toward the novel.

"Maria Concepcion"¹ is like the Old Testament or classical Greek drama in tone and theme. A primitive fate, instead of the Christian God, seems to reign over a Mexican community without being noticeably influenced by the rosaries and masses of the ostensibly Catholic peasantry. The pattern of the story is so elemental that murder proves not to be a mortal sin, but a good because the act restores order and unites the killer with society. Although Maria Concepcion, wife of Juan and, eventually, murderess of his mistress, considers herself a "good Christian" (p. 4), her abundant piety is actually a retreat from society. She is "an energetic religious woman" who

¹Katherine Anne Porter, The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter (New York, 1965), pp. 3-21. All further references to Porter's shorter fiction are to this edition, and subsequent page numbers will be incorporated into the body of the text in parentheses.

rigorously maintains the forms of her faith, such as, for example, being married in the church sanctuary, "instead of behind it, which was the usual custom, less expensive, and as binding as any other ceremony" (p. 4). The customs of the village are not her customs, whether they concern marriage practices or ancient folk superstitions.

The story begins with Maria Concepcion in a state of complacent absorption in her duties as a housewife and, before long, a mother. Like Job, she is satisfied with her virtuous existence and totally unprepared for the forthcoming upheaval:

She walked with the free, natural, guarded ease of the primitive woman carrying an unborn child. The shape of her body was easy, the swelling life was not a distortion, but the right inevitable proportions of a woman. She was entirely contented. Her husband was at work and she was on her way to market her fowls (p. 3).

She walks "carefully, keeping to the middle of the white dusty road," protecting herself from the "treacherous" thorns and cactus needles at the side of the road that waylay the traveler with the promise of "dark shade" (p. 3). But on passing the beehives of Maria Rosa, "her careful sense of duty" (p. 6) relaxes and she longs for "a fresh crust of honey. The delicious aroma of bees, their slow thrilling hum, awakened a pleasant desire for a flake of sweetness in her mouth" (p. 4). She approaches the hives, but stops short at the sound of laughter; undetected, she witnesses her husband, Juan,

engaging in love play with Maria Rosa. Suddenly her self-satisfying existence turns to ashes:

Maria Concepcion did not stir nor breathe for some seconds. Her forehead was cold, and yet boiling water seemed to be pouring slowly along her spine. An unaccountable pain was in her knees, as if they were broken (p. 5).

All she can feel is the monstrous injustice of the moment, and she longs "to sit down quietly and wait for her death" (p. 6). But anger against Maria Rosa qualifies her despair: "Yes, she is a whore! She has no right to live" (p. 6). For Juan's part this is just the latest in a series of peccadillos enjoyed during five years of marriage, unknown to Maria Concepcion, whose idea of marriage as of religion lies in its forms. She never suspects that, to Juan, their marriage is "a sinking inside, as if something were lying on my stomach" (p. 11). For a woman who has "no time to waste" (p. 3), giving in to the urge for a taste of honey is the unusual occurrence that leads Maria Concepcion into the alluring but dangerous shade. Ironically, her straying from the straight and narrow path, completely blameless in itself, parallels Juan's straying after other sweets, and it serves to expose the truth of her existence, which, until now, her devotion to externals had prevented her from seeing.

When Juan runs off to war, taking Maria Rosa with him, and her own baby dies four days after birth, Maria Concepcion refuses to weep and retreats into a cold and unrewarding asceticism:

If she had not gone so regularly to church, lighting candles before the saints, kneeling with her arms spread in the form of a cross for hours at a time, and receiving holy communion every month, there might have been talk of her being devil-possessed, her face was so changed and blind-looking (p. 2).

She refuses to seek solace in the community because she believes that the forms of her faith will sustain her, and she rejects the prayers as well as the concern of her people. As she replies to the sympathetic godmother of Maria Rosa: "Keep your prayers to yourself, Jupe, or offer them for others who need them. I will ask God for what I want in this world" (p. 9). Maria Concepcion suffers from the outrage of being sinned against, and in her pride and self-righteousness she cannot act except superficially; she finds, however, that the forms which failed to preserve her marriage now fail to comfort: "She was gaunt, as if something were gnawing her away inside, her eyes were sunken, and she would not speak a word if she could help it" (p. 10). It is not until Juan returns from the war with a pregnant Maria Rosa that Maria Concepcion awakens from her stupor of grief and bitterness. And once again, as in her desire for the honey, she submits to irrational feelings instead of "her careful sense of duty" (p. 6); she runs out of her house, and, instead of taking the "accustomed" road, she "set off across the plowed fields. . . . She ran with a crazy panic in her head, her stumbling legs. Now and then she would stop and look about her, trying to place herself. . ." (p. 13).

Then she comes "to her senses completely" (p. 13) and recognizes what must be done. But before the necessary deed can be accomplished, Maria must undergo a catharsis:

The thing which had for so long squeezed her whole body into a tight dumb knot of suffering suddenly broke with a shocking violence. She jerked with the involuntary recoil of one who receives a blow, and the sweat poured from her skin as if the wounds were shedding their salt ichor. . . . All her being was a dark confused memory of grief burning in her at night, of deadly baffled anger eating at her by day, until her very tongue tasted bitter, and her feet were as heavy as if she were mired in the muddy roads during the time of rains (pp. 13-14).

Until now Maria Concepcion has been trapped in a spiritual mire of her own making, unable to weep or to act. Her self-esteem and her belief that the forms themselves have great meaning permitted no release of the feeling of outrage that was slowly destroying her. In discovering what she feels has to be done, she is suddenly freed from the paralyzing and isolating grip of self-righteousness and the human passion takes over. She stabs Maria Rosa to death.

In panic Maria Concepcion runs home after the crime, and Juan, who has returned home to "reclaim" his husbandly rights, sees her crawl into their hut as "he had seen her crawl many times toward the shrine at Guadalupe Villa" (p. 14); and to him she confesses her great sin. "The mere forms of Christianity have been supplanted by the substance of reality. For Juan, she becomes a "creature unknown to him, who bewildered him utterly, for whom there was no possible explanation" (p. 15);

but there is a light in her eyes that was not there before, and he sees her as "invaluable, a woman without equal among a million women, and he could not say why" (p. 17). What he does know, however, is that all is "settled. I shall not go away again. We must stay here together" (p. 16). The violence of the murder binds Juan and Maria Concepcion forever; theirs is a marriage of form no longer.

Of even more significance is a larger consequence of the murder. By refusing to cooperate with the police investigators, the members of the community, in effect, collaborate with Maria Concepcion and indirectly condone the killing of the flagrantly immoral Maria Rosa. Even old Lupe, the slain girl's godmother, forms part of this conspiracy, and Maria Concepcion suddenly feels

guarded, surrounded, upborne by her faithful friends. They were around her, speaking for her, defending her against the beaten dead. Maria Rosa had thrown away her share of strength in them, she lay forfeited among them. Maria Concepcion looked from one to the other of the circling, intent faces. Their eyes gave back reassurance, understanding, a secret and mighty sympathy (p. 20).

The community embraces the murderess as its own because, in the sinful act, she throws her humanity, her strength and her weakness, in with the common lot. The sterility of a detached, abstract goodness, yields to the realm of the tangible, where true life must begin.

And as further evidence of her involvement, Maria Concepcion instinctively takes as her own the newly born child of

Maria Rosa. The story concludes with Maria Concepcion resting in her hut, the baby cradled in her lap and Juan sprawled asleep nearby; at this moment she experiences a new and inexpressible peace, as if her breath were the breath of the world:

The night, the earth under her, seemed to swell and recede together with a limitless, unhurried, benign breathing. She drooped and closed her eyes, feeling the slow rise and fall within her own body. She did not know what it was, but it eased her all through. Even as she was falling asleep, head bowed over the child, she was still aware of a strange, wakeful happiness (p. 21).

The false contentment Maria Concepcion enjoys at the beginning of the story is replaced by a happiness possible only after she has acknowledged her human frailty by committing a crime of passion. As the story ends, a kind of grace flows through the earth and around the renewed family, erasing the horror of the past and promising peace as the reward of the torturously acquired harmony between individual and community.

The central action of "Maria Concepcion" is man's fundamental search for place; the protagonist struggles to place herself in a chaotic world. In 1924 Porter published a very short story, "Magic" (pp. 39-41), in which this action is repeated amidst conflict arising from tension between the individual and an unjust world in which he must find his proper place.

"Magic" is a parable, nearly as brief as a summary, its facts few and in themselves seemingly insignificant, yet conveying a meaning that encompasses all of Porter's work. The

story is told by a Negro maid seeking to "rest" her mistress, Madame Blanchard, while combing her hair. In worse times the Negro worked in a brothel, and she draws upon that experience for the story of Ninette, the most popular girl in the house. Ninette quarrels continually and violently with the madam over "her checks." She knows she is being cheated, but her accusations are futile and answered by a beating at the hands of the madam. In desperation Ninette decides to leave, and takes the madam forty dollars as payment for her freedom. At the sight of the withheld money, the madam flies into a rage and attacks her savagely; then, bloodied and penniless, the girl is thrown into the street. But soon the customers miss her, and the madam quickly sees that it was a mistake to let such a valuable girl escape. And so the madam resorts to magic to bring her back. The magic works: Ninette returns, very sick, "but happy to be there" (p. 41).

From this summary of the maid's narrative, "Magic" seems to be a straightforward story about brutality and superstition that raises no profound questions and offers no such answers. In its matter-of-fact presentation it may seem as "cold and cynical"² as Ship of Fools is purported to be, yet neither of these "critical" suppositions is true.

²Jean Alexander, "Katherine Anne Porter's Ship in the Jungle," Twentieth Century Literature, XI (January, 1966), 179.

The story is structured on two levels: that of the narrator, the Negress, and her audience, Madame Blanchard; and the subject of the narration, Ninette and her madam. Hence, there are two servants and two mistresses, one of each in a serene world and in a violent world, who, through juxtaposition, dramatize a complex theme. Madame Blanchard, the "madam" of her domain, is the ruler of a sophisticated and peaceful world; but her house is also subject to the disruptions of "magic": she believes her linens are bewitched because "they fall away so in the wash" (p. 39). And her remark gives rise to the maid's tale.

Throughout her narrative the maid reveals an unquestioning acceptance of the world's mysteriousness, its injustices, its inequalities. She, too, has worked in a "fancy house": "I work where there is work to be had . . . and saw too many things, things you wouldn't believe," and she is very "happy to be here . . . because it is so serene" (p. 39). Ninette, however, is unable to accept the injustice of her position, being "well-liked by all the men" (p. 39) and being cheated in proportion to her success. The Negress explains to her mistress that of course the "madam cheated on Ninette's checks" because "it is a business, you see, like any other" (p. 39). It is also part of the inevitability of things that Ninette can do nothing, for, as the maid explains, "after the checks were out of her hands, what could she do?" (p. 39). Ninette, nonetheless,

curses her mistress and vows to "get out of this place" (p. 39). But escape is nearly impossible: "the madam had a full understanding with the police" (p. 40), who, for a nice fee, return prodigal daughters to the house, their alternative being a more rigorous confinement in a literal jail. Illness is the only way out: "if they got too sick, she sent them away" (p. 40).

With all these forces aligned against her, Ninette attempts to leave anyway; after all, she makes "more money than anybody else in the house" (p. 40) but receives the worst treatment. In her innocent righteousness she announces her intention and returns money rightfully hers but wrongly withheld, expecting to be set free. Instead, she is beaten with the intention of destroying her usefulness:

. . . the madam took hold of her shoulders, and began to lift her knee and kick this girl most terribly in the stomach, and even in her most secret place, . . . and then she beat her in the face with a bottle, and the girl fell back again into the room where I was making clean. I helped her to the bed, and she sat there holding her sides with her head hanging down, and when she got up there was blood everywhere she sat (p. 40).

The madam can now let the girl go because she is "no good" to her anymore. But when the madam sees that she has let hatred and anger interfere with sound business, she turns to magic to find the abused girl. In the most significant passage in the story, the decisive ritual is performed, the symbolic gathering together of Ninette's "being":

They took the chamber pot of this girl from under her bed, and in it they mixed with water and milk all the relics of her they found there: the hair from her brush, and the face powder from the puff, and even little bits of her nails they found about the edges of the carpet where she sat by habit to cut her finger- and toe-nails; and they dipped the sheets with her blood into the water, and all the time the cook said something over it in a low voice: I could not hear it all, but at last she said to the madam, Now spit into it: and the madam spat, and the cook said, When she comes back she will be dirt under your feet (p. 41).

This ceremony is a pagan counterpart of the Roman Catholic Mass, and it is ironically appropriate that the religion of such a world be a perversion of Christian worship. The Negro cook of the brothel is the priestess who conducts this black mass, which centers around the gathering of the victim's "relics" into the mock chalice. With the incantation accomplished, the next step is for the communicant, the madam, to await and "receive" Ninette.

When Ninette returns after seven nights, as predicted, she is still "very sick, the same clothes and all, but happy to be there. One of the men said, Welcome home, Ninette" (p. 41). Ironically the fancy house becomes "home"--a truly magical transformation for Ninette, who feels "very happy to stay . . . and cannot say why" (p. 41). What she has cursed and hated seems more real than anything outside its boundaries. She recognizes her "enemy" as "friend" (p. 41), and, in so doing, submits to the world's discrepancies.

Ninette is the traditional victim, who, in accepting victimization, paradoxically becomes a victor of sorts. She knows violence and injustice as a way of life, but the agony of her final suffering acts like the Old Testament's covenant of blood, which transforms through sacrifice the unholy ground. Ninette returns, not because her spirit is broken, but because the place where she has shed her blood has become a vital part of her being; her return restores her to a wholeness elsewhere impossible. As the maid says, "And after that she lived there quietly" (p. 41). Like the maid who tells her story, Ninette finally acknowledges a mistress-servant situation, albeit unjust, but it provides a way of living, apparently the only one open to her. Now the business of the brothel and her life can continue, however imperfectly.

William L. Nance sees "Magic" as just one more instance of Porter's supposedly omnipresent "rejection theme," and as "one of the purest examples of the destructively oppressive union."³ But instead of rejection and destruction, both "Magic" and "Maria Concepcion" conclude with an emphasis upon acceptance; instead of withdrawing from society, the two protagonists acknowledge and live within its imperfect structure.

Rejection and withdrawal from society and its disastrous effects are also explicitly dramatized in the story "A Day's

³William L. Nance, Katherine Anne Porter and the Art of Rejection (Chapel Hill, 1964), p. 15.

Work" (pp. 388-406), published in 1940. George Hendrick calls it a "realistic story of the depression in the New York slums,"⁴ a comment that amounts to no more than superficial categorizing. More fundamentally, the story is about the displaced individual's violent and unexpected discovery of a tenable place in society.

"A Day's Work," like "Maria Concepcion," portrays a marriage in which the wife keeps constantly in mind a severe standard of duty and right conduct, regardless of the slack ways of the world and a ne'er-do-well husband. As Mrs. Halloran never tires of saying to her recently married daughter, "The woman has to do right first, and then if the man won't do right in turn it's no fault of hers" (p. 391), or "do right and leave wrong-doing to the men" (p. 393). In spite of this apparent toleration of masculine wickedness, her fiercest moral indignation is reserved for Mr. Halloran's frequently expressed desire to follow in the steps of his old friend Gerald McCorkery, a successful politician and racketeer in the community; the very thought of living on protection money acquired in the numbers game is intolerable to her. Thus, partly as a result of his wife's insistent morality and partly because the Depression forced him out of a job in the grocery business, Mr. Halloran has spent the last seven years on relief. Fearful of

⁴George Hendrick, Katherine Anne Porter (New York, 1965), p. 107.

approaching old age, Mrs. Halloran savagely hoards most of the money she earns doing washing and ironing.

The husband's view of life offers a sharp contrast to that of his wife. Concerning the "numbers racket," he agrees with the "cop at the corner," who finds it part of the nature of things: "What's the harm, I'd like to know? A man must get his money from somewhere when he's in politics" (p. 395). To Mr. Halloran the good life should be enriched by tobacco, whiskey or at least beer, easy money, love, and loyal friendships. But his marriage years ago to pretty Lacey Mahaffy, who is now the ugly Lacey Halloran "standing there ironing clothes with a dirty look on her whole face like a suffering saint" (p. 389), seems to have been the start of his long drift away from the success he was meant to enjoy. Quite frankly, he explains to himself, "she has been my ruin" (p. 397). The only comforts he can depend on now are his pipe and an occasional beer, both hateful to Lacey Halloran. She, on the other hand, cannot bear her husband's complaining submissiveness, "as if he hadn't a bone or muscle in him" (p. 401); at least, she is not mediocre in her intemperate virtue. But neither one is able to see the evil in living apart from the community, no matter how imperfect that community may be.

And again, as in the two stories analyzed previously, violence is the instrument by which old habits are destroyed. When Mr. Halloran returns after "a day's work," which consists

of getting drunk while McCorkery holds a political meeting, he boastfully waves a fistful of the charitable racketeer's money in his wife's face. Instantly outraged, she swears that she will have none of that "dirty money" (p. 404); and she vows to secure her own salvation in spite of his wickedness. To her husband she suddenly becomes a frightful creature:

She was standing there before him in a kind of faded gingham winding sheet, with her dead hands upraised, her dead eyes blind but fixed upon him, her voice coming up hollow from the deep tomb, her throat thick with grave damp. The ghost of Lacey Mahaffy was threatening him, it came nearer, growing taller as it came, the face changing to a demon's face with a fixed glassy grin. "It's all that drink on an empty stomach," said the ghost, in a hoarse growl. Mr. Halloran fetched a yell of horror right out of his very boots, and seized the flatiron from the board. "Ah, God damn you, Lacey Mahaffy, you devil, keep away." He raised the flatiron and hurled it without aiming, and the specter, whoever it was, whatever it was, sank and was gone (p. 404).

Although Mr. Halloran believes for a moment that Lacey is dead, he actually, and ironically, effects a more dramatic change: after forty years of a death-like existence Lacey Mahaffy Halloran comes to life and enters into society by accepting her husband's new job as a McCorkery campaign worker. She runs after her husband, who has staggered from the scene of the crime, and finds him being returned by the neighborhood policeman. Ignoring the enormous bruise on her forehead, she asks the officer to bring her husband upstairs. When the officer asks about the bruise, he receives a surprising answer:

"I fell and hit my head on the ironing board," said Mrs. Halloran. "It comes from overwork and worry, day and night. A dead faint, Officer Maginnis.

Watch your big feet there, you thriving, natural fool," she added to Mr. Halloran. "He's got a job now, you mightn't believe it, Officer Maginnis, but it's true. Bring him on up, and thank you" (p. 405).

The rigidly puritanical woman who never knew "how to loosen her corsets and sit easy" (p. 391) is gone at last, replaced by a wife able to share her husband's life in the community. She takes up the "dirty money" and places it along side her own "honest" savings, admitting that it is "a poor start, but something" (p. 406). She further displays her personal acceptance of the ways of the world when she tells her daughter that, if the new job is "not just what I prayed for, still it beats nothing. . . . It's like a miracle" (p. 406).

Mrs. Halloran, like Maria Concepcion, tries to live an ideal kind of goodness, only to discover that one cannot live on this earth with clean hands. The "goodness" of both women is self-destructive because it is not of this world; and they learn forcefully and quickly that meaningful life arises out of involvement. After putting her drunken husband to bed, Mrs. Halloran deliberately beats him with a wet towel for his failure to provide honestly for her, for his moral cowardice, and for his criminal pettiness. In a litany of grievances she purges her grief and bitterness at a world that is full of sin and endless pain, but in so doing, she recognizes her part in that sin, in that humanity. Both Mrs. Halloran and

Maria Concepcion learn that the imperfect world cannot be avoided by attempting high mindedness, as they try to do through their abstract religiosity, or as Ninette tries by running away. All learn that survival, and perhaps salvation, begins with a recognition of the world's injustice and, more importantly, of one's own inescapable part in that injustice. In short, this involves a recognition of the community of sinners; in that solidarity lies the only life possible in a fallen world.

Whereas Maria Concepcion, Ninette, and Mrs. Halloran realize the truth of the world's composition and take their assigned places in its structure, the unnamed protagonist of "That Tree" (pp. 66-79), a story published in 1940, persists against all the facts of existence in a romantic egomania that blinds him to his larger faults. And in his intentional rejection of personal involvement with the injustices of the world, he ignores truth for the sake of complacency--an ignorance about which Ship of Fools is particularly concerned.

Ray B. West describes "That Tree" as a serious, straightforward study of "an American writer in Mexico whose Midwestern bride destroys his integrity as a poet, deserts him, then returns only after he has succeeded as a hack. It is a study in shallow love accomplished through superficial success."⁵

⁵Ray B. West, Jr., Katherine Anne Porter (Minneapolis, 1963), p. 9.

But this misleading summary follows only some of the facts of the story without regard for its tone and particular form, which unfailingly transform the facts into ironic statements. "That Tree" is like Ship of Fools in its deceptiveness of tone and thematic simplicity; its full significance includes the discrepancy between the surface action of the narrative and the narrator's unintentional exposure of selfish motives that discount his version of the central conflict.

The protagonist, a failed poet turned journalist, reminisces about his marriage to Miriam, his first wife, in a monologue delivered to a drinking companion in a Mexican bar. He admits that, during the four years before their divorce, he wrote large quantities of poetry that "was all no good and he knew it" (p. 66). This realization, however, does not prevent him from living like a poet according to "notions . . . out of books" (p. 76). Miriam, a serious-minded former school teacher from Minneapolis, has no patience with such pretentiousness; as she makes clear to her husband, her favorite poet is Milton.

One of his main notions about the artistic life is the virtue of poverty, which he and Miriam encounter when he is fired from the job that is their only financial support. Thrown into the society of other hungry individuals who are "always getting ready to paint and to write" (p. 77), he finds life to be "a picnic" (p. 75), and cannot understand Miriam's disgust at feeling surrounded by failures:

It was no good trying to explain to her his Franciscan notions of holy Poverty as being the natural companion for the artist. She said, "So you think they're being poor on purpose? Nobody but you would be such a fool." Really the things that girl said. . . . He went on in his pawky way trying to make clear to her his mystical faith in these men who went ragged and hungry because they had chosen once for all between what he called in all seriousness their souls, and this world (p. 76).

For the would-be poet these notions are part of an idealized existence that centers around the image of "a tree in a good climate" under which he yearns to lie indefinitely, "wearing worn-out sandals and a becoming, if probably ragged, blue shirt, . . . writing poetry" (p. 66). But this dream clashes head-on with Miriam's abiding notion: life is a serious business that frequently requires "walking the chalk line" (p. 73), especially in marriage. She labors desperately to make her husband see that his views on poetry, poverty, and life in general are only props for his egomania. Grown "shabby and thin and wild-looking" (p. 77) with the struggle, she finally gives up the marriage after four years and returns to Minneapolis.

Ironically, the divorce accomplishes something Miriam failed to do. It startles the egomaniac enough to realize that he will never amount to anything as a poet; and turning to journalism he goes "in for a career in the hugest sort of way" to become "a recognized authority" (p. 78) on Latin-American revolutions. And now the successful journalist sits reminiscing in a Mexican bar, five years--and two more unsuccessful marriages--after his divorce from Miriam.

One of his bitterest memories is the ease with which Miriam saw through his pretentiousness and proved to be right about his poetry. It had somehow been her fault, he feels, that he had never found "that ideal tree" (p. 78). And his desire to get even with her, a hatred carefully nurtured for five years, is about to be realized. Triumphantly he displays a letter just received from Miriam. She asks permission to return to him because, during their years apart, she has come to find herself much to blame for the failure of their marriage. Moreover, "she loved him truly and she always had, truly; she regretted, oh, everything, and hoped it was not too late for them to make a happy life together once more" (p. 79).

Indulging in a feeling of malicious magnanimity, the journalist outlines his concept of "a happy life" with Miriam:

She was going to live again in a Mexican house without any conveniences and she was not going to have a modern flat. She was going to take whatever he chose to hand her, and like it. And he wasn't going to marry her again, either. Not he. If she wanted to live with him on these terms, well and good. If not, she could just go back once more to . . . Minneapolis. If she stayed, she would walk a chalk line, all right, one she hadn't drawn for herself (p. 79).

The egomania shows itself here to be as flourishing as it ever was, and now grown unashamedly vicious. "That Tree" ends at this point with no indication of how successful the journalist's plan for Miriam will be; perhaps she may not be fortunate enough to escape to Minneapolis a second time.

Porter has created as the protagonist-narrator of "That Tree" a soul worthy of inhabiting the ninth circle of Dante's Inferno, where the archetypal betrayers of trust--Judas, Brutus, Cassius--are embedded in ice. They are the violators of persons made especially vulnerable to them through faith in a reciprocal love. For Porter, as for Dante, this kind of inhumanity is especially diabolic. The cruelty the journalist intends to inflict upon the woman who loves him is calculated and heartless, and thus a greater crime by far than Maria Concepcion's crime of passion. As Robert Penn Warren observes of Porter,

first, she presumably believes that there is not merely pathology in the world, but evil--Evil with the capital E, if you will. Along with the pity and the humor of her fiction there is the rigorous, almost puritanical, attempt to make an assessment of experience. Second, she presumably believes in the sanctity of what used to be called the individual soul. She may even go as far as Hawthorne does in "Ethan Brand," and elsewhere, in regarding the violation of this sanctity of soul as the Unpardonable Sin.⁶

To go further, Porter apparently believes in what used to be called Original Sin, sin not in the Calvinistic sense of innate evil, nor, as she herself says by way of denial, "that the sins of the father are visited on the third or fourth generation,"⁷ but "the moral and religious perversion in which

⁶Robert Penn Warren, "Uncorrupted Consciousness: The Stories of Katherine Anne Porter," The Yale Review, LV (Winter, 1966), 289.

⁷Barbara Thompson, "Katherine Anne Porter: An Interview," The Paris Review, XXIX (Winter-Spring, 1963), 93.

every man finds himself inevitably plunged by reason of his birth into a perverted environment . . . and a more or less profound corruption."⁸ In "That Tree" the journalist denies this belief when he scorns Miriam's "chalk line," which is her demand to be considered seriously and realistically, not as a fixture to be arranged in the shade of his idealistic tree.

Because Maria Concepcion, Ninette, and Mrs. Halloran come to realistic terms with "more or less profound corruption," they start on the laborious and painful path to wisdom. Four-year-old Stephen, in "The Downward Path to Wisdom" (pp. 369-387), learns a fundamental lesson about himself and his world when he stumbles upon what Howard Baker calls "an ancient discovery, to the effect that human beings, as such, are bad."⁹ Stephen learns very early something the journalist never does--that there is a community of sinners of which he is only one part; the discovery enables him to accept the harsh and bewildering world and, thus, to cope with its confusion. For Porter this elementary discovery is the beginning of moral awareness. George Core perceives that "she bases her philosophical and religious position solidly on the premise of Original Sin, and much of her irony and skepticism about man

⁸Andre-Marie Dubarle, The Biblical Doctrine of Original Sin, translated by E. M. Stewart (New York, 1964), p. 244.

⁹Howard Baker, "The Upward Path: Notes on the Work of Katherine Anne Porter," The Southern Review, IV (January, 1968), 1.

is logically derived from this belief. She, like Shakespeare, assumes man's infirmities."¹⁰

To view the human condition as morally corrupt does not mean, however, that nothing exists but evil. As Porter explains in The Days Before,

the refusal to acknowledge the evils in ourselves which therefore are implicit in any situation is as extreme and as unworkable a proposition as the doctrine of total depravity; but somewhere between them, or maybe beyond them, there exists a possibility for reconciliation between our desires for impossible satisfactions and the simple unalterable fact that we also desire to be unhappy and that we create our own suffering; and out of these sufferings we salvage our fragments of happiness.¹¹

Some form of reconciliation is possible, either between or beyond the extremes of romantic idealism and common despair. Porter's fictional characters either discover the reconciling idea, or attitude, or emotion which enables them to function with some kind of order in an imperfect world, or they fail completely, as does the journalist in "That Tree." And in the short novel "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" (pp. 269-317), published in 1938, the protagonist, Miranda, finds that the greatest reconciliation lies beyond the limits of this world.

This story takes place during World War I; and the war, says Sara Youngblood, "is the 'gong of warning' which wakes

¹⁰George Core, "'The Best Residuum of Truth'," The Georgia Review, XX (Fall, 1966), 290.

¹¹Katherine Anne Porter, The Days Before (New York, 1952), p. 183.

Miranda from sleep and beats the rhythm of the day for her. It focuses in the day-to-day world of Miranda the theme of death which haunts her dream since war has unreined the 'pale horse' of destruction."¹² The war destroys any semblance of order and strips away meaning from individual events; survival becomes "a series of feats of sleight of hand" (p. 274), and love is in danger of extinction. Miranda knows with an awful certainty that her love for the soldier Adam is somehow already doomed before it really begins: "She liked him, she liked him, and there was more than this but it was no good even imagining, because he was not for her nor for any woman, being beyond experience already, committed without any knowledge or act of his own to death" (pp. 283-284). The influenza, "the plague, something out of the Middle Ages" (p. 281), that spreads through her city, and eventually kills Adam, is already in Miranda, so that she awakes one morning in pain, "and it seemed reasonable to suppose it had started with the war" (p. 274). She feels death threatening all the world because "we are speechless animals letting ourselves be destroyed" (p. 291). In the beginnings of delirium, Miranda attempts to explain to the innocent and patriotic Adam what the war truly signifies:

¹²Sara Youngblood, "Structure and Imagery in Katherine Anne Porter's 'Pale Horse, Pale Rider'," Modern Fiction Studies, V (Winter, 1959-1960), 345.

. . . the worst of war is the fear and suspicion and the awful expression in all the eyes you meet . . . as if they had pulled down the shutters over their minds and their hearts and were peering out at you, ready to leap if you make one gesture or say one word they do not understand instantly. It frightens me; I live in fear too, and no one should have to live in fear. It's the skulking about, and the lying. It's what war does to the mind and the heart, Adam, and you can't separate these two--what it does to them is worse than what it can do to the body (p. 294).

As Miranda's illness intensifies, the nightmarish delirium unexpectedly turns into a "beatific vision" by which, says Caroline Gordon, Miranda, "like Dante, will live for the rest of her life."¹³ Instead of "oblivion, . . . a whirlpool of gray water turning upon itself for all eternity" (p. 310), she beholds a glorious company of people moving easily towards her,

and Miranda saw in an amazement of joy that they were all the living she had known. Their faces transfigured, each in its own beauty, beyond what she remembered of them, their eyes were clear and untroubled as good weather, and they cast no shadows. . . . The drifting circle widened, separated, and each figure was alone but not solitary; Miranda, alone too, questioning nothing, desiring nothing, in the quietude of her ecstasy, stayed where she was, eyes fixed on the overwhelming deep sky where it was always morning (p. 311).

The community of sinners that Porter describes in her short stories is complemented by this vision of the community of saints, where each man is "alone but not solitary," possessing glorified bodies that "cast no shadows"--a description of

¹³Caroline Gordon, "Katherine Anne Porter and the ICM," Harper's Magazine, CCXXIX (November, 1964), 148.

Paradise as orthodox as Dante's. Miranda's reaction to this unexpected experience of glory is immediate acceptance of the appropriateness of such an end to earthly travail: "Why, of course, of course, said Miranda without surprise, but with serene rapture as if some promise made to her had been kept long after she had ceased to hope for it" (p. 311).

Caroline Gordon believes that it is this passage "which justifies the conclusion that Miss Porter's Comedie Humaine is a 'divine comedy' and not an embodiment of a tragic vision of life."¹⁴

When Miranda's recovery from her illness pulls her back into the grim chaos of a world at war, she feels like "an alien who does not like the country in which he finds himself, does not understand the language nor wish to learn it, does not mean to live there and yet is helpless, unable to leave it at his will" (p. 313). This pained attitude toward life has been called "nihilistic,"¹⁵ as has Porter's own attitude in many of her stories. But Robert Penn Warren points out that Porter knows "that if one is to try to see 'all,' one must be willing to see the dark side of the moon. She has a will, a ferocious will, to face, in its full context, what Herman Melville called the great 'No' of life."¹⁶ And Miranda's final

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Nance, p. 135.

¹⁶Warren, p. 290.

attitude toward the world fittingly describes the dominant tone of Ship of Fools: "She saw with a new anguish the dull world to which she was condemned, where the light seemed filmed over with cobwebs, all the bright surfaces corroded, the sharp planes melted and formless, all objects and beings meaningless, ah, dead and withered things that believed themselves alive" (p. 314).

CHAPTER III

SHIP OF FOOLS: AN IRONIC PARABLE

Katherine Anne Porter calls herself a "Sunday poet,"¹ and one Sunday afternoon in Berlin, many years before Ship of Fools took shape as a novel, she wrote a poem about her voyage from Mexico to Germany. In this poem, entitled "After a Long Journey," the speaker wonders what should be remembered from the many "images of travel":

The loud cold shudders of our ship that sailed
on sea and meadow,
The Caribbean, the Atlantic, the river Wiser;
The spouting of whales, the bitter trap-mouthed faces
of friars
In Santa Cruz de Tenerife, or the slender girls with
doll hats tied to their foreheads,
And water jars on their heads, running wildly surefooted
as deer
In the steep stony pathways; or the lonely music
Of the train wheels turning in the night with that
lunatic tune
We never could follow?

All, all such memories are rayed metal, a star with
a cutting edge,
That shears one moment from another. Must we lose them
all
Or shall we do a montage of them, and frame it?²

That long and adventurous voyage taken in the summer of 1931
is framed finally in the novel, a "montage" that uses the

¹"Mlle Passports," Mademoiselle, XLVI (November, 1957), 68.

²Katherine Anne Porter, "After a Long Journey," Mademoiselle, XLVI (November, 1957), 142.

traditional image of a ship laden with humanity as its fundamental metaphor. Although Porter takes her title from a fifteenth-century allegory, her Ship of Fools is strikingly different from the allegorical Das Narrenschiff by Sebastian Brant. The novel has more in common with the woodcuts that illustrate Brant's work, many of which are by Durer; their powerful economy of line and devastating details seem closer to the spirit of Porter's work than does Brant's text. The novel uses one of these woodcuts as a pictorial epigraph on its title page, a woodcut by the Master of the Bergmann Shop entitled "The Schluraff Ship" (The Ship of the Lazy Apes); it depicts a shipload of fools singing the fool's theme song: Gaudeamus Omnes.³

Ship of Fools is, however, often labeled as allegory, both in praise and condemnation. M. M. Liebermann says that Porter's work is not a novel at all, but rather a "kind of modern apologue," owing more than title to Brant's allegory; and as allegory "it not only has the right, it has the function by its nature to 'caricature' its actors," to be misanthropic, to have no unity of action except unification in theme.⁴ Thus, Liebermann answers the three charges most

³See woodcut 108 in Sebastian Brant's The Ship of Fools, translated by Edwin H. Zeydel (New York, 1962), p. 349.

⁴M. M. Liebermann, "The Responsibility of the Novelist: The Critical Reception of Ship of Fools," Criticism, VIII (Fall, 1966), 386.

frequently levied against the novel, i.e., superficial characterization, pessimism, and lack of plot, by saying that these qualities, not permitted in the novel, are natural to the allegory.

When Porter was asked if Ship of Fools is an allegory, she replied with her usual dryness, "It's just exactly as it seems to be. It's an allegory if you like, though I don't think much of the allegorical as a standard. It's a parable, if you like, of the ship of this world on its voyage to eternity."⁵ Many of Porter's shorter works, as we have seen, are parables, stories that do not point a moral but rather involve a larger action--the action basic to the human condition, man seeking to find his place in the world. Ship of Fools, according to Porter, differs from her shorter fiction in that it is "a longer voyage, that's all."⁶ And in a statement of self-analysis first published in 1940, she spoke of her short stories as "fragments of a much larger plan which I am still carrying out, and they are what I was . . . 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."⁷ Ship of Fools is by far

⁵Barbara Thompson, "Katherine Anne Porter: An Interview," The Paris Review, XXIX (Winter-Spring, 1963), 113.

⁶Ibid., p. 114.

⁷Katherine Anne Porter, The Days Before (New York, 1952), p. 130.

her most imposing development of that "larger plan," a parable on a grander scale. And with an imaginative precision rarely achieved in the novel, she etches the "majestic and terrible failure of the life of man in the Western World."⁸

The qualities of Porter's shorter fiction--the almost total objectivity, the perpetual undercurrent of violence, the distaste for the abstract, the chaos of a falling world--all are characteristics of the novel. But the novel achieves what a shorter work simply cannot do: it extends the vision of the stories to its tragic conclusion, which is a corrosive yet compassionate awareness of "that falling world between 1850 and 1950."⁹

The world of the novel is the world to which Miranda in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" returns after her sojourn in the valley of death; although she awakens to the Armistice, "no more war, no more plague,"¹⁰ she cannot rejoice. She has discovered that life is the "real" death, that the source of joy simply does not exist in any physical way. Miranda's nurse and doctor and all her friends call her fortunate to have escaped death. Society conspires to force her to be positive about living, but she can only wonder "at the time and trouble the living

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid., p. 76.

¹⁰Katherine Anne Porter, The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter (New York, 1965), pp. 269-317. All further references to Porter's shorter fiction are to this edition, and subsequent page numbers will be incorporated into the body of the text.

took to be helpful to the dead" (p. 316). She can be positive about only one thing: truth is not found in the past nor the future, but in some moment of grace where all moments are fused into one. And this unity only occurs, Miranda discovers, in an experience of death. In the face of this fact, life is, at best, comically ironic, to be endured by looking "properly to the art of the thing": Miranda will be Lazarus with a "top hat and stick," a jar of cold cream, and "a box of apricot powder" and then, as she tells her shocked friends, "no one need pity this corpse" (p. 316).

Miranda's conclusion is not the skepticism that is bitter and stultifying, but an acknowledgment of the world's imperfectibility and temporality. She becomes a knowing pilgrim, aware of the terrible discrepancies between truth (death) and what is believed true (life), and that knowledge is ironic. It is a perspective that Northrop Frye calls "the mythos of winter," the myth of the nightmare, which is not tragic but ironic. And Frye suggests that, "whenever a reader is not sure what the author's attitude is, what our feelings are supposed to be, we have irony with relatively little satire."¹¹ Ship of Fools is too complex and subtle to be satire; it's much closer in tone and spirit to Flaubert's Madame Bovary than to Swift's Gulliver's Travels or Erasmus' Praise of Folly, both of which

¹¹Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton, 1957), p. 223.

have been used to explain the novel. "Irony, with little satire," continues Frye, "is the non-heroic residue of tragedy, centering on the theme of puzzled defeat."¹²

The sine qua non of Ship of Fools is the discrepancy between what is and what should be; moreover, given the nature of present reality, what should be will probably never be realized. The tone of such a vision is necessarily "pessimistic," but it is a pessimism based on a vision of reality that places the blame squarely on man and not on a predestined order of things. In an interview with Rochelle Girson for The Saturday Review, Porter defends the book against the charge of pessimism:

I don't think that this is a pessimistic book at all. I am not trying to make anybody out a saint or sinner, but just showing human beings with failings and prejudices or with burdens a little more than they can bear, burdens that have made them what they are and through which they are trying to struggle. Some of them make it and some of them don't.¹³

The parable Ship of Fools concerns the condition of man, miserable and lost in a world "heaving in the sickness of a millennial change," as he persistently searches for a better life; but in his ignorance, in his evasion of moral responsibility, in his self-deception he usually fails to make significant gains. And the more man abuses the capacity for

¹²Ibid., p. 224.

¹³Rochelle Girson, "The Author," The Saturday Review, XLV (March 31, 1962), 15.

recognizing the frailties of the human condition, the more brutal his failures become. Such are the hard-edged, unflattering truths laid out in Ship of Fools for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

CHAPTER IV

SHIP OF FOOLS: THE COLLUSION WITH EVIL

Ship of Fools is essentially about evil, evil that becomes foolish in man's ignorance of self and his personal destiny. Because man frequently decides that evil is only misguided good caused by environmental pressures, there is no such thing as forgiveness, for there is no such thing as blame. Though finding himself in a chaotic and unjust universe, he refuses to admit his participation in the evil that surrounds him, either by passive acceptance or by active encouragement. Because of man's "consent by default"¹ to evil, his sins lose their tragic quality and become, instead, human foolishness.

Katherine Anne Porter says that the novel is about "the criminal collusion of good people--people who are harmless--with evil. It happens through inertia, lack of seeing what is going on before their very eyes."² And she writes about evil, not because "wickedness is more interesting than goodness. I don't find it so, but I do find it compelling because

¹Katherine Anne Porter, Ship of Fools (New York, 1962), p. 264. All references to the novel are taken from this edition. Subsequent page numbers will be incorporated into the text.

²Rochelle Girson, "The Author," The Saturday Review, XLV (March 31, 1962), 15.

it is so often unrecognized, it often gets away with murder for the reason that no one has the courage to oppose it; or perhaps they sympathize with it secretly."³ Dr. Schumann, the ship's physician, voices the author's concern:

. . . it takes a strong character to be really evil. Most of us are too slack, halfhearted, or cowardly--luckily, I suppose. Our collusion with evil is only negative, consent by default, you might say. I suppose in our hearts our sympathies are with the criminal because he really commits the deeds we only dream of doing! Imagine if the human race were really divided into embattled angels and invading devils--no, it is bad enough as is . . . with nine-tenths of us half asleep and refusing to be waked up (p. 264).

Life aboard the German vessel Vera teaches that the rule of thumb is to do nothing. Little Frau Schmitt, recently widowed in Mexico, quickly learns "the great lesson life had been preparing for her all this time--and to think she had never suspected what it would be!--she must be quiet, keep to herself, express no opinions, bear no witness, carry no tales, make no confidences, nobody cared, nobody cared . . ." (p. 356). When Herr Glocken, the hunchback, attempts to stop the thievery of the dancers of the zarzuela company in the port town of Tenerife, he is met by various degrees of condescension on the part of the first-class passengers: "He had seen the dancers leaving with their loot, and so had all the others, and yet they stood there, gossiping all around the subject and never once admitting guilt or complicity" (p. 394).

³Hank Lopez and Katherine Anne Porter, "A Country and Some People I Love," Harper's Magazine, CCXXXI (September, 1965), 60.

Frau Schmitt wants the thieves to be caught, but, as she asks herself, "who would denounce them? And to what authority? Who would listen to her? She had troubles enough, griefs enough. . . . This was a terrible, evil world and she was helpless in it" (p. 405). Her conscience thus silenced, she feels free to buy some of the beautiful stolen goods. When the zarzuela dancers take over the ship's entertainment for one night, displaying their stolen goods and even taking over the Captain's table, no one stops them. The Captain wonders "how they had managed to blackmail so many people, how had they got themselves seated at his table, where they had no right to be, and what criminal effrontery had given them the notion in the first place" (pp. 426-427). In effect the ship is taken over, if not physically, then morally; active evil, personified by the Spanish dancers, overwhelms the passive "good" of the first-class passengers. No one realizes that the greatest evil lies not in the pure maliciousness of the zarzuela company but in the smug complicity of those who permit it to flourish.

The main events of the novel--the rescue of the bulldog Bebe by a steerage worker who drowns in the attempt, the stealing of La Condesa's pearls, the wholesale robbery of the shops in Tenerife by the zarzuela company, the expulsion of Herr Freytag from the Captain's table, and the bacchanalian feast held by the Spanish dancers near the end of the voyage--

reinforce the novel's theme that man in the modern world has chosen to do nothing; and in this atmosphere of moral inertia chaos naturally flourishes.

These events, however, are only the more important external actions in the novel. During the twenty-six day journey equally significant events occur beneath these externals in the minds of the individual passengers--in their deception of self and their continual misreading of the motives of others. The tension of the novel does not in any way depend on the disclosure of the happenings of narrative; instead, it lies in the other direction, in the internal moments when moral choices are made and rejected. And the novel's urgency arises from the accumulative meaning of such choices. Externally the interaction between the travelers is comical, at times satirical, often stupid; beneath that surface, however, numerous moral judgments are being made that, collectively, generate the feeling that time may be running out for the human race.

There are some forty-five characters in the novel, each having something to do with each other's lives, each in his own way unveiling the problems of man in a falling world. Together they embody primarily three themes, which are shared by the shorter works: man's search for place, the abstracting tendency of the "good" man concerning the presence of evil, and the neglect and betrayal of love. The passengers aboard the Vera are united in seeking a "better" life, but the search

often involves exile, either forced, as in the case of La Condesa and the steerage workers, or self-imposed, as in the case of the Huttens, the Baumgartners, the Lutzes, Frau Rittersdorf, Frau Schmitt, Lizzi Spockenkieker, and Herr Rieber, who constitute the exile of the mediocre. Herr Wilhelm Freytag and Mrs. Treadwell, the American divorcee, are more complicated in their deliberate aloofness from humanity; their exile is caused by their very sensitivity to the problems of others. Mrs. Treadwell, for example, retreats "from the threat of human nearness, of feeling. If she stayed to listen, she knew she would weaken little by little, she would warm up in spite of herself, perhaps in the end identify herself with the other" (p. 142). Her cry against involvement is the cry of all the passengers: "No, don't tell me any more about yourself, I am not listening, you cannot force my attention. I don't want to know you, and I will not know you. Let me alone" (p. 142). Herr Glocken, the hunchback, is exiled by his deformity; William Denny by his crudeness; Herr Graf by his religious fanaticism; Captain Thiele by his position and his stupidity; the zarzuela company by their overt maliciousness; Dr. Schumann by his "abstract goodness" (p. 17); David Scott and Jenny Brown by their quarrel with each other; Elsa Lutz and Johann Graf by their youth and innocence.

In the passengers' search for a better tomorrow, each is challenged in the present moment of the voyage by evil, either

in himself or in others, a challenge answered by the tendency to reason that evil right out of existence. The zarzuela "gypsies," including the six-year-old twins Ric and Rac, are the exception to the habit of abstracting because they openly enjoy their evil and, hence, have no need to rationalize its presence. La Condesa, for more humane reasons, also does not abstract nor romanticize anything. The question of involvement is, finally, the question of love, which is too often answered by betrayal in Ship of Fools to be a source of hope for a brighter future.

The passengers aboard the Vera form a community united by only one thing, the common hope that "they were bound for a place for some reason more desirable than the place they were leaving" (p. 10). The ship is appropriately named because the passengers seek a "truth" that will be a final destination for their hopes and fears. Yet each traveler suffers from a "mysterious sense of failure, of forced farewell, of homelessness" (p. 9), and "from insufficiency in his own degree" (p. 10).

Structurally Ship of Fools has no chapter divisions; it is made up of three lengthy parts, each with a title and an epigraph: Part One, "Embarkation," Quand parton-nous vers le bonheur?" (Baudelaire); Part Two, "High Sea," "Kein Haus, Kein Heimat . . ." (Brahms); Part Three, "The Harbors," "For here we have no continuing city . . ." (Hebrews 13:14). Whereas the section headings represent the travelers' physical location,

the three quotations may serve as an outline for their moral journey: the voyagers set "sail for happiness" only to find themselves "houseless and homeless" on the high seas; finally, arriving at port, they fail to find the city of their dreams.

But their common plight does not unite them, does not "by any means make of them fellow sufferers" (p. 11). The misery of their existence is a force of isolation rather than a burden made more tolerable by an awareness of its universality, and their persistence in remaining isolated turns the ship's name into a mockery. As the travelers themselves conclude, "considering the price of the tickets, the ship was no better than she ought to be--rather a poor, shabby affair, in fact" (p. 21). The same, of course, can be said about their existence on board.

It is important to remember that Porter's fictional pilgrimage takes place in a fallen world; and "this ship of the world on its voyage to eternity"⁴ is, therefore, a parody of the Dantesque journey, a parody that is necessarily dark because there is no Virgil showing the way. As Jenny Brown, the young American artist, says, "This would be such a nice voyage if only we knew where we were going" (p. 145).

Like several protagonists in Porter's shorter fiction, the travelers aboard the Vera search for their own place in the world, but the tragedy of this pilgrimage is that most of

⁴James Ruoff and Del Smith, "Katherine Anne Porter on Ship of Fools," College English, XXIV (February, 1963), 396.

them will never find it. As the voyage gets under way the "anonymous, faceless" (p. 10) passengers emerge into focus, each struggling to overcome the despair of rootlessness and the terrible doubt that there is no better life, no better place at journey's end. For example, Frau Hutten, who is returning to Germany with her husband after a decade in Mexico, is "almost afraid to hope" (p. 81) that their homeland will be as she remembers. Even Herr Professor Hutten, who rarely ventures away from theorization to feel anything, is "full of misgivings" (p. 82). Yet in the middle of their passage, marked with continual seasickness and one emotional crisis after another, both Huttens forget their dream and long to retreat to the past: "Mexico! Why did we leave it. What sent us on this terrible voyage? We were happy there, we were young together there . . ." (p. 322). Assaulted by the cruelties of the present and the obscurity of the future, they transform the memory of the past into nostalgic joy. And in their inability to discover meaning in their present sufferings, that better place will always prove to be out of reach.

The Huttens are also the most obvious examples of "good" people who rationalize evil out of existence. Professor Hutten firmly believes in the perfectibility of man; and, as he is fond of telling his wife, his belief that he is "part of a great universal movement towards the betterment of mankind" has, no doubt, "kept him alive" (p. 80). His habit of eating

three enormous meals a day, in spite of seasickness, has also played a part in his survival. The Huttens project a pattern that is followed by nearly every passenger to some degree: Professor Hutten's response to any action is to rationalize; his wife responds emotionally but ineffectually. When a man in the steerage jumps overboard and rescues the Huttens' beloved bulldog and he himself drowns, the Professor immediately proposes alternate theories concerning motivation:

I confess . . . to being deeply puzzled as to the motives of that unlucky man. The hope of reward--of course, but that is almost too simple. Did he wish to attract attention to himself, to be regarded as a hero? Did he--unconsciously of course--long for death, and so took this way of committing suicide without being actually guilty of it?" (p. 321)

Dr. Schumann tries to explain to the couple that the rescuer was a simple man named Echegaray who carved little animals out of bits of wood, and no motive was necessary for such a man. Frau Hutten says that she wishes to remember the man's name but cannot bear to attend his funeral. Thus, even a good act, a truly noble one, loses its significance when it is rationalized, or simply ignored, as Frau Hutten finds herself doing.

The Huttens are superficial characters, but as the novel soon demonstrates, their one-dimensional quality is not imposed on them from without, but mirrors their shallow souls. Although the human sacrifice leaves no mark on the Huttens, Professor Hutten is disturbed enough by the more macabre events of the voyage to begin a pronouncement on the moral turpitude of mankind:

". . . stupidity is always evil, it is not capable of anything else." These words dismayed him, they sounded like an echo--from where?--in his mind. Surely he did not believe that any human being, no matter how sunk in sin, was irredeemable? What had come over him? He could not imagine, but he could not deny either that this strange point of view struck him powerfully as revealed truth. There was such a thing as incurable love of evil in the human soul. The Professor tasted such bitterness in his mouth he wondered if his gall bladder had emptied itself on his tongue (p. 342).

Though shaken by this unexpected and distasteful truth, he backs away from its power to correct his own stupidity, and he soon launches into a new theory on the nature of man. Professor Hutten's revelation presents the kind of moral choice that Porter is interested in; the moment of truth arrives swiftly to probe the depth of the soul. Too often, as with the journalist in "That Tree" and the Professor himself, the soul fails the test. For Porter moral choice involves a rare wisdom, not the intellectuality of Professor Hutten or the journalist, but an ego-shattering awareness of one's moral inadequacy in a fallen world.

Another passenger who is offered as disturbing a chance to correct himself as that experienced by Professor Hutten is Herr Wilibald Graf; both men, however, remain unenlightened. Herr Graf is an ailing religious fanatic in a wheel chair who believes his touch has the power to cure illness. Traveling with him as practical nurse is his nephew and heir, Johann, the salvation of whose soul is the uncle's constant concern. He keeps the boy as "penniless as a beggar" (p. 181) out of

the certainty that money will open the door to sin for Johann. When the boy finally complains bitterly about this financial bondage, Herr Graf wishes he were strong enough to chastise such rebelliousness properly, "to mortify the flesh until the hard knot of the will was reached and dissolved--ah, a task he might have done so well, and would have so delighted in, the saving of this now ungovernable soul" (p. 181). But Johann desires only to be allowed the freedom to breathe something other than senile religious fanaticism. He wants enough money to buy a bottle of wine and some decent clothes and to be able to indulge in the customary pleasures of youth. "Give me a little money," he cries out to his uncle, "I want only to be free" (p. 442).

Although Johann gives in once more to his uncle's ascetic demands, he struggles to explain to the sin- and death-obsessed old man that his young soul is still his own. And, surprisingly, Herr Graf does give him some money, but only with the intention of preventing the thievery he imagines a desperate Johann capable of. Moved by the unexpected money to feelings of sincere pity, Johann tenderly prepares his uncle for bed, and the old man has the chance to look "for the first time into a candid, friendly face, strangely a forgiving face, so transformed he would hardly recognize his hard-hearted sister's hard-hearted child" (p. 443).

Herr Graf, believing himself blameless, cannot accept his nephew's sincerely gracious forgiveness; neither can he recognize

the truth that the boy's flesh and will have as yet done nothing to deserve the mortification he so much desires to inflict. He cannot see beyond his own senility and sickness, and the oppressive visions of death and eternity they inspire, to recognize youthful vitality and innocence standing before him in the person of his "hard-hearted sister's" son. Like Professor Hutten, Herr Graf lacks enough moral strength to admit the error of his ingrained solipsism, which parades behind the mask of religion. The dying fanatic and the overfed professor are two of the greatest moral fools aboard Porter's ship.

And there are more than a few others aboard the Vera who refuse to let themselves be moved toward wisdom by exposure to the realities of the human condition. An instance that discloses as many diseased hearts as are revealed by the zarzuela dancers' thievery takes place in Cuba. On the third day after leaving Veracruz, the Vera enters the port of Havana to take on more passengers, too many more. Eight hundred and seventy-six Spanish laborers are loaded into steerage space designed to accommodate three hundred and fifty people. Victims of a crisis in the Cuban sugar market, they are being shipped back from whence they were shipped to Havana in more prosperous times. The first-class passengers express shock and sympathy, momentarily, for this obviously destitute hoard; but compassion is soon replaced by fear. So many people of such low breeding must certainly be dangerously diseased and violent. "I would

put them all in a big oven and turn on the gas" (p. 59), says Herr Rieber, an "enlightened" publisher. Frau Rittersdorf, who considers herself an intellectual and keeps a journal of her thoughts, remarks, "I am wondering--should we not complain to the Captain? After all, we did not engage to travel in a cattle boat" (p. 60). Herr Baumgartner, a lawyer from Mexico and a hopeless alcoholic, anxiously asserts that "you can smell the diseases among them. No, it is not right. We should have been warned" (p. 60). Professor Hutten theorizes on the living conditions in the steerage, while his wife sighs and moans at "the sad truth that there is no cure for the troubles of life, no peace nor repose anywhere . . . but she could not bear to think of it" (p. 60). And so she moves away from the distressing sight of poverty and misery, "her face tender and vacant" (p. 60). Mrs. Treadwell, as usual, does not feel anything except annoyance with her fellow travelers' remarks; she feels not even "the faintest desire to learn anything" (p. 61), and the topic of the steerage laborers seems particularly uninviting.

Only a few of the passengers see that the sugar workers are "not faceless: they were all Spanish, their heads had shape and meaning and breeding, their eyes looked out of beings who knew they were alive" (p. 57). Herr Wilhelm Freitag, an oil executive planning to return to Mexico with his Jewish wife, suddenly realizes the homelessness of the workers:

And what would it be like to know always, to carry the knowledge like a guilty secret, that they had not come to any given place of their own free happy choice, but had been driven there; that they were in flight, harried over one frontier and then another, without power to choose their place or to refuse what shelter might be offered. What a frightful existence for any man, what a doubly shameful existence for a German! (p. 134)

Freytag, for all his nationalistic superiority, can sympathize with the plight of displaced people, especially when he realizes that his marriage to a Jew may cost him a similar fate; he imagines his "long flight . . . beginning, and he could not imagine the end. The future was a vast hollow sphere, strangely soundless, uninhabited, without incident or detail" (p. 134).

While Herr Freytag can feel some compassion for the displaced laborers crammed together far below the first-class accommodations, there is no one aboard who clearly understands how their exile differs from the exile of those walking the upper decks. The exploited Spaniards suffer a homelessness forced upon them by external economic powers over which they have no control. The apparently more fortunate passengers are exiles by personal choice, however much they may fool themselves into thinking otherwise. Pride, fear, and selfishness radiate constantly from most of the major characters in the novel, and the results are moral ignorance and spiritual passivity, two defense mechanisms no willful exile can exist without for long.

Herr Freytag's special defense mechanism is his pride in the innate superiority of German blood, which he feels has by marriage passed on to Mary, his wife:

. . . he knew he was altogether German, a legitimate son of that powerful German strain able to destroy all foreign bloods in its own veins and make all pure and German once more; and the whole world had been for him a foraging place, a territory of profitable sojourn until the day should come when he would go home for good, having never been away in his soul. Wherever he had been, he had felt German ground under his feet and German sky over his head; there was no other country for him, and how was this taken away from us, Mary? You are no longer a Jew, but the wife of a German; our children's blood will flow as pure as mine, your tainted stream will be cleansed in their German veins. . . (p. 134).

Freytag, certainly one of the more intelligent and sensitive passengers aboard, is, nevertheless, incapable of transferring his understanding of the human condition to his personal condition. Although he knows that his attitude toward his wife as a Jew is somehow a form of unfaithfulness, he ignores this truth by retreating into idealized memories of their life together, and he is unaware that this retreat is a symptom of the death of his love for Mary. He speaks frequently of his wife to Jenny Brown, who at one point wonders "if he realized that . . . he was talking about his wife in the past tense" (p. 305). And when the fact that his wife is Jewish becomes common knowledge and causes him to be evicted from his place at the Captain's table, he is unable to find much comfort in the cleansing power of his German blood. Instead he grieves for all that he has "thrown away in this insane marriage" (p. 334).

Herr Freytag is a more complex character than either Professor Hutten or Herr Graf because, unlike them, he is

frequently able to appraise the moral worth of others; but when he himself is the subject to be evaluated, his understanding grows cloudy. A chain of thought provoked by his cabin mate, Arne Hansen, illustrates this double standard in action:

For he had discovered about Hansen something he had surmised a good while ago about most persons--that their abstractions and generalizations, their Rage for Justice or Hatred of Tyranny or whatever, too often disguised a bitter personal grudge of some sort far removed from the topic apparently under discussion.

This elementary fact of human nature came to him as a personal discovery about others, he did not once include himself in it. His own plight was unique, peculiar to himself, outside all the rules. His feelings about it were right beyond question, subject to no judgments except his own, and not to be compared for a moment to such shabby little troubles as Hansen's (p. 411).

Freytag's faith in the superiority of German blood gives way here to a more exclusive kind of pride, a belief that he is a "unique" German among Germans, requiring special consideration.

A passenger of even greater complexity and ability to understand others is La Condesa, a Spanish noblewoman driven from her native society years ago for political reasons. Her long residence in Cuba ends when she boards the Vera in Havana, on her way to renewed exile on the island of Tenerife. Throughout the voyage she engages the moral qualities as well as the professional skills of the ship's physician, Dr. Schumann, who describes her as an "abandoned lost creature" (p. 122). The years of exile have marred La Condesa's original beauty

and jangled her nerves, and now she eases the pain of her circumstances with drugs and trifling sexual encounters. No other character in the novel feels as deeply as she does "the loss of human love and sympathy, the literal alienation from the common life of one's fellow beings" (p. 115). Her countrymen packed into the steerage decks at least share their misery with family and friends, but she must travel alone. When Dr. Schumann tries to comfort her with the prospect of a bright future upon a beautiful island where she may live as she chooses, she corrects him sharply:

"As I choose?" she said, her voice rising but not in a question. "Alone? Friendless? Without a centavito? Without my children, not even knowing where they are? And how shall they ever find me? Oh my friend, have you gone mad with virtue and piety, have you lost your human feelings, how can you have forgotten what suffering is?" (p. 367)

Such fervently expressed wisdom is seldom heard aboard the Vera, and Dr. Schumann learns to know her well enough to realize that, "above all, she was not a fool, but a woman of the world and wise in it . . ." (p. 171). Truly a rarity, La Condesa is "not a fool" in Ship of Fools, although her behavior sometimes suggests otherwise. She does not tolerate the officiousness of the ship's Captain, nor the impudence of servants, nor the platitudes of Dr. Schumann. And yet she does more than simply tolerate six Cuban medical students who follow her about to make her the object of their "monkeyish ridicule" (p. 171). As she explains to Dr. Schumann, the

students remind her of her sons because they are young and innocent in their maliciousness; and the comfort they bring her is worth the price of ridicule.

Through her battered and debased nobility of spirit La Condesa represents the ideal of womanly beauty that is no longer possible in the modern world. She is beauty and innocence victimized by fate, exiled from society and driven to despair by the absence of love. She is a betrayed Cordelia, abused yet forgiving, with the power to inspire love as well as ridicule. The sixty-year old Dr. Schumann, knowing that this voyage will be his last because of his diseased heart, feels that his life is nearly over; and yet he falls desperately in love with La Condesa and thus has the most significant experience of his life. In other times La Condesa would have been the Beautiful Lady, surrounded and protected by the courtly traditions; but in a world of fools she becomes a tragic parody of that lost ideal. The six Cuban students call her "La Cucaracha Mystica" (p. 103), and become her retinue of knights, devotion that she acknowledges with "a formal little bow, very old-fashioned and learned in courtesy" (p. 105). She tells them of her own children, who "were right to revolt, they were right, my children, even if they die for it, even if I must die, or be in exile" (p. 111). La Condesa believes in involvement and sacrifice and love, the traditional creed of a knight's lady, but the creed is spoiled and tarnished by the apathy of the world.

La Condesa's creed does, however, get through to one of her followers, Dr. Schumann, who struggles violently against her demand for involvement. He analyzes his feelings with medical objectivity to discover that he had fallen in love with her from the first, long before he could admit it; but he finds it very humiliating that a man of his age has such feelings: "Folly, folly, at his age, a married man, running in his mind after that strange woman as if he were one of those pimple-faced students, yet denying his feelings to himself, blaming her for everything . . ." (p. 238). He begins to hate her hold over him and to see her as an "evil spirit" come to "burden his life to the end of his days, to bring him to despair" (p. 316); and then he becomes terrified at the evil he is forced to recognize in his own nature. She makes him feel apprehensive about the condition of his soul, a condition he has painstakingly prepared to meet sudden death by heart failure. She loves him, as she unexpectedly tells him, for what he is, for his "gravity and seriousness and strong principles" (p. 200); he loves and hates her for revealing to himself that he is not the good man he thought he was.

Because of La Condesa, Dr. Schumann comes to realize that in spite of all his spiritual preparations,

he had lived on flattering terms with the delusive wickedness of his own nature; comfortable in the doctrine that no man may be damned except with his

own consent, and that man's desire for redemption is deathless as his own soul; and when he does evil he knows what he is doing. How could he have wronged that unhappy creature so, when he had believed he meant only to help and comfort her?
(p. 350)

When La Condesa is ready to be put ashore on her island of exile, Dr. Schumann finally sees that his concern for his own spiritual safety has led him to betray her creed of love and sacrifice. Full realization comes to him only after she asks him if he entered her cabin the previous night and kissed her and pronounced his love, or was she dreaming? It was not a dream, confesses the doctor. For La Condesa there can be no clearer sign of betrayed love. "Why did you never kiss me when I could have known surely, when I could have been happy?" (p. 369) she cries. And then the cowardly doctor realizes what he has done. He has "tormented her with his guilty love" and then let her depart "without even the faintest promise of future help or deliverance" (p. 373). But perhaps it is not yet too late to make amends. While the ship is still in port at Tenerife, he sends La Condesa a note testifying to his allegiance and promising deliverance. The note is returned without an answer, and Dr. Schumann learns the lesson La Condesa learned long before: the creed of involvement, sacrifice, and love is apparently impossible to live by in this fallen world.

Like so many others aboard the Vera, Dr. Schumann does not sin consciously, but his refusal to love is a betrayal that carries with it evil beyond simple immorality. Although he is by far the most virtuous individual in Ship of Fools, his goodness remains cerebral. He is the kind of man who cannot live without a clear conscience, but La Condesa lives according to "just the faintest sense of honor which does almost as well" (p. 193); and the irony of the situation is that, for all her immorality, she succeeds where the doctor fails. Her sins are sins of involvement, and thus she is the better Christian.

Dr. Schumann's love fails because it remains forever unrealized in the physical realm. La Condesa remains a "lost creature" because, as she well knows, life can no longer have meaning if deprived of love. There are numerous other examples of relationships without love in Ship of Fools, ranging from La Condesa and Dr. Schumann to the crudest of lovers, Lizzi Spokenkieker and Herr Rieber. "Love," says Jenny Brown, "this ship is simmering with it. I'm sure it's all Real Love" (p. 169). Despite Jenny's sarcasm, the novel works through examples of varying kinds of love toward a definition of "Real Love." The extremes of Romantic Love on the one hand and unions of hate on the other are fulfilled by an anonymous Mexican Bride and Groom, who float in the honeymoon of love, and the twins Ric and Rac, the six-year-old son and daughter

of a dancer in the zarzuela company, who are united in their hatred of the adult world. Between these extremes are the marital relationships of the Lutzes, the Baumgartners, and the Huttens, which display strained toleration instead of love, death of the spirit rather than life. On a lower but unhypocritical level there are the purely sexual and pragmatic relationships of the zarzuela dancers and their pimps. And the brief union between Johann Graf and the dancer Concha brings together sexual innocence and experience to enlighten both participants. But Lizzi Spockenkieker and Herr Rieber share only sniggering sexual banter and horseplay; their relationship is so shallow that it is not even physically consummated. The only truly reciprocal love aboard the Vera emerges from the contest of differences conducted by Jenny Brown and David Scott, "Jenny Angel" and "David Darling," as they call each other between quarrels. Theirs is the antithesis of ideal Romantic Love, but in this world of fools it is the only kind possible.

For David and Jenny the question of place motivates their running quarrel with each other; although lovers, they have separate cabins and intend separate destinations; David to Spain, Jenny to France. These two American artists are not deceived, however, about the truth behind a seemingly senseless argument over their itinerary. As Jenny sorrowfully remarks, "There is no place to go" because "the place you are

going towards doesn't exist yet, you must build it when you come to the right spot" (p. 146).

In the falling world of the novel Romantic Love has no place, and the blind desire for that impossible ideal too often negates the value of a love hammered out day by day. David and Jenny's reluctance to relinquish their ideals almost destroys what love they do possess for each other:

They were both ashamed of the evil natures they exposed in each other; each in the first days of their love had hoped to be the ideal image of the other, for they were desperately romantic, and their fear of exposing themselves, of showing and learning unlovely things about each other, made them dishonest and cruel. In their moments of truce both believed that the love between them was very pure and generous, as they wished it to be; there needed only to be . . . needed only to be what, exactly, they both wondered, secretly and separately, and found no answer (p. 44).

Jenny thinks she believes in "love as tenderness and faithfulness and gaiety and a true goodness of the heart to the loved one" (p. 145). David stubbornly believes that the essence of love can be reduced to the standard of physical faithfulness.

Jenny discovers, however, through her association with the romantic Freytag, the evils of her own romanticism. Love, says Freytag, mouthing the Romantic Ideal, is "a benevolent passion, full of patient kindness and fostering tenderness, faithful not by choice nor design but by nature, hardy and lasting, full of courage" (p. 168). Jenny is calmed momentarily by Freytag's words because they echo "not what she knew in her bitter mind, but her feelings" (p. 168). Suddenly,

however, Freytag's voice strikes her as "sick and sentimental and false" (p. 168). Jenny comes to see the falsity of her own ideals and to understand that real love encompasses conflict and pain:

David is going to be mean and tough and stubborn and faithful to death. We aren't going to kill each other because I mean to get away before that happens. But we'll leave dents in each other. When I get through with David, he'll know the difference between me and the next woman, and I'll be carrying David like a petrified fetus for the rest of my life (p. 169).

David, stoutly puritanical, has his own strong ideas about love. He is certain that Jenny will destroy them because "she is going to be unfaithful to me, she is going to have 'affairs' as she did before" (p. 149). She tries to make him see that he is the only man she has ever really loved; those "affairs" were "just for the excitement. . . . It wasn't love, it was fox fire" (p. 149). But to high-minded David such assertions are more disturbing than reassuring because, by his standards, lovemaking should never be done for pleasure but always for love, no matter how frequently one changes partners.

David's conscious moral principles are, however, fortunately not beyond being influenced by physical experience. In spite of his hatred of Jenny's "promiscuity," he can at times find her most attractive. On one occasion he sees her

waiting for him, looking upward, very beautiful in one of her plain white frocks. . . . She had the severity and simplicity of a small marble figure, smooth and harmonious from head to foot, . . . fresh as a field of

roses; she was smiling at him and he smiled back. . . .
 "There she is," he said, . . . and leaped down the
 stairs while even then Jenny was coming towards him
 (p. 416).

As if nurtured by their blows, curses, accusations, and
 suspicions, the love of Jenny and David continues to survive
 and even seems to grow stronger. As they disembark in
 Bremerhaven, Jenny disturbs their present affectionate mood
 by wondering aloud why they are "going on" together since she
 feels sure "we aren't going to spend our lives together"
 (p. 496). For once David refuses to add to the disturbance
 and answers discreetly:

"Here we go talking again. . . . Let's think
 of something pleasant."

"You think of something, David darling," said
 Jenny, "something wonderful."

David leaned with great discretion and a very
 straight face and whispered, "Tonight in Bremen
 we'll sleep in the same bed for a change." Jenny
 made a slight purring sound at him, and he watched
 her face grow radiant (p. 497).

This dialogue is on the final page of the novel, and it gains
 in significance from its location. It implies that, unlike
 the love realized by Dr. Schumann only after the time for
 consumation had passed, the love of Jenny and David has inter-
 ludes of tangible intimacy in which to reconcile their minds
 and hearts.

Generalizations and "final" judgments about a novel as
 complex as Ship of Fools run the obvious risk of distorting
 through oversimplification, but the risks must be taken if
 analysis is to respond to one clear theme of that very novel:

those unwilling to take risks are at least fools if not something much worse.

The world of Ship of Fools may seem, at first glance, a kind of retroactive foreshadowing of Hitler's Germany; but a second glance reveals the narrowness of such an "historical" interpretation. The novel is not just about the human faults that allowed and even encouraged Hitler; it is about human faults. And these faults come into being by human choice, not as the punishment or sport of Fate or Destiny. Man may choose to act rightly or wrongly, or he may choose to try to live without acting at all. Ship of Fools illustrates all these possibilities, but the last alternative receives special attention. It is the means whereby man seeks to deny the responsibilities of his free will. But because Porter's concept of human nature recognizes free will as a part of that nature, a man who tries to avoid exercising choice is trying to deny part of his humanity; and of course the attempt to live without making choices is itself a choice. There is perhaps no better name than Fool for one who attempts this impossible evasion of responsibilities.

But while granting her characters free will, Porter is not saying that it can be exercised by everyone at any desired moment. She reveals in an interview that " every once in a while I see a character of mine just going towards perdition. I think, 'Stop, stop, you can always stop and choose, you

know.' But no, being what he was, he already has chosen, and he can't go back on it now."⁵ It is this very point that Charles Child Walcutt seems to overlook when he blames Ship of Fools because nowhere in it "does a character face a choice that the reader can take seriously enough to care about."⁶ More precisely, Porter shows the choices her characters made perhaps years before boarding the Vera by having them confront anew situations that, in most cases, display a renewal of the earlier choice. For example, long before meeting La Condesa, Dr. Schumann has decided that his greatest commitment in life must be to keeping himself in a state of spiritual preparedness lest death catch him in a state of sin. True to this commitment he withdraws within himself so thoroughly that when La Condesa appears, desperately in need of love, he cannot uncoil his affections from around his own ailing heart in time to help her. Ironically, by being so concerned with his own salvation, he has failed in a test of love, and, perhaps, thereby lost his hope of heaven. Likewise, Professor Hutten, Herr Graf, and Herr Freytag all reveal in present moments the past choices that have by now so conditioned them that they are unable to change, no matter how bright a burst of insight they may receive.

⁵Barbara Thompson, "Katherine Anne Porter: An Interview," The Paris Review, XXIX (Winter-Spring, 1963), 102.

⁶Charles Child Walcutt, Man's Changing Mask (Minneapolis, 1968), p. 153.

These once free but now self-bound characters constitute a majority of the more important passengers in Ship of Fools; and their moral choices, which collectively stress the theme of collusion with evil, give the novel its predominantly dark quality. Like old dogs, most of the passengers are too set in their ways to be capable of further choice. Only a pair of young lovers, Jenny and David, seem to promise otherwise.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Katherine Anne Porter's talent for portraying the moral ugliness and perversion of mankind is proved by ample evidence, but this is only one side of the coin; for her, man's failure is necessarily a spiritual one. As Patricia R. Plante observes: "In Ship of Fools, the souls of sinners are not seen dangling over the abyss of an angry hell; they are shown as presently inhabiting one of their own making."¹ In The Days Before Porter states that "there are only two possibilities for any real order: in art and in religion. . . . And only the work of the saints and artists gives us any reason to believe that the human race is worth belonging to."² And in a letter to Donald Sutherland, she gives what she calls "an incomplete expression of a principle of my being," a statement as relevant for the saint as the artist: "Life is one bloody, horrible confusion, and the one business of the artist is to

¹Patricia R. Plante, "Katherine Anne Porter: Misanthrope Acquitted," Xavier University Studies, II (December, 1963), 89.

²Katherine Anne Porter, The Days Before (New York, 1952), p. 132.

know it, admit it, and manifest his vision of order in the human imagination. . . ."3

Although she is opposed "to every form of authoritarian, totalitarian government or religion, under whatever name in whatever country,"4 Porter affirms "an ancient system of ethics, an unanswerable, indispensable moral law. . . . These laws have never been the peculiar property of any party or creed or nation, they relate to that true and human world of which the artist is a living part."5 She steadfastly maintains that the worth of human life and individual fate must not be held in contempt, and that the one function of the artist is to preserve the "humanities and the dignity of the human spirit."6 It is thus curious that some of her critics maintain, just as steadfastly, that the pattern of her work "is a completely negative one and the view of life which corresponds to it is one of unrelieved darkness,"7 that Ship of Fools is "controlled by an abstraction"8 and that she excludes the possibility of salvation.9

³Donald Sutherland, "Ole Woman River: A Correspondence with Katherine Anne Porter," The Sewanee Review, LXXIV (Summer, 1966), 761.

⁴Porter, p. 128. ⁵Ibid., p. 104. ⁶Ibid., p. 132.

⁷William L. Nance, Katherine Anne Porter and the Art of Rejection (Chapel Hill, 1964), p. 245.

⁸Robert Kiely, "The Craft of Despondency--The Traditional Novelists," Daedalus, XCII (Spring, 1964), 228.

⁹George Hendrick, Katherine Anne Porter (New York, 1965), p. 140.

These critics simply refuse to see the positive elements which constantly recur in Porter's fiction. In Ship of Fools she utilizes two of the "images of travel" that she includes in her poem "After a Long Journey," the "spouting of whales" and the "slender girls with doll hats tied to their foreheads, / And water jars on their heads."¹⁰ These images signify in the novel that the world is not totally crazed with hate and foolish with abstraction. After the funeral at sea of the drowned woodcarver, Echegaray, the Vera's passengers suddenly see

three enormous whales, seeming to swim almost out of the water, flashing white silver in the sunlight, spouting tall white fountains, traveling with the power and drive of speedboats, going south---no person could take his eyes from that beautiful spectacle until it was over, and their minds were cleansed of death and violence.¹¹

But only David Scott and Jenny Brown take this unreasonably beautiful sight and utilize it to restore their relationship; forgetting their grievances and grief with each other, they make peace and hope for the end of their quarrel. And Jenny remembers for David's benefit another sight, as lovely and as meaningful to her as the whales:

. . . I remember once I was swimming far out in the Bay of Corpus Christi, on a beautiful day, and I was coming towards land again, and a whole school of

¹⁰Katherine Anne Porter, "After a Long Journey," Madoiselle, XXXXVI (November, 1957), 142.

¹¹Katherine Anne Porter, Ship of Fools (Boston, 1962), p. 329. All references to the novel are taken from this edition, and subsequent page numbers will be incorporated into the body of the text in parentheses.

porpoises came straight at me, oh they looked like mountains rising and dipping in the waves, and I thought I might die of fright, but they just divided around me and went on, sweeping out to the Gulf of Mexico. And I was suddenly very happy, and thought, "Oh, this is the pleasantest thing that ever happened to me!"

"And was it?" he asked, very tenderly and a little teasingly.

"Nearly," she said (p. 330).

For the first time David does not protest against Jenny's girlish memory, acknowledging its value although, like Jenny, not understanding its meaning. Jenny is like the pilgrim Dante, seeing with the directness and simplicity of a child; there is no reason for the engulfing porpoises to effect such happiness, but for Jenny no logical explanation is necessary. In terms of the novel, however, the image of the whales and porpoises--significantly located in the Bay of Corpus Christi--suggest the possibility of Christian reconciliation.

And in Santa Cruz de Tenerife the passengers from the Vera watch amazed as young girls leap about the mountain side carrying water cans on their heads, looking like angels in flight:

A young slender girl, limber and tough as a ballet dancer, in a short tight black dress showing her bare brown legs, her head swathed in a small square black shawl with a tiny hat no larger than a doll's resting on her forehead, . . . hurled herself across their path and leaped up the rocky incline ahead of them, turning sharply to the left on a narrower path, sure-footed as a deer and as wild. On her head she carried a great flat tray loaded with battered water cans, and under this weight, in her torn tennis shoes,

she went at flying speed uphill, in a half-run with rigid shoulders, raised chin and extravagantly swaying hips, her arms spread like wings (p. 377).

To the islanders there is nothing unusual in "the simple, natural, everyday task of young girls carrying water" (p. 378), but to the travelers the sight is a mysterious phenomenon of grace and youthful strength and beauty; there is nothing like it in their world. All wonder at the little black doll hat every girl wears flat on her forehead, yet no islander has ever thought to question it, for "it was a custom, nothing more. A part of their dress. If a girl did not wear that hat, she would not be allowed to carry water. It was all so simple . . ." (p. 378). The world of the travelers is so controlled by comforting rationalizations that anything mysterious must be hounded until it becomes explainable.

Surely Porter intends in this section on the town of Tenerife to emphasize the sterile imagination of "civilized" man in contrast to the beauty and grace of a more primitive people, people who have not yet abandoned mystery and tradition for the sake of rationalization. A similar emphasis runs through the novel in the daily contrast between the first-class passengers, isolated in their egocentric pursuits, and the sugar workers, who form a community united by religion, nationality, and poverty. When the workers prepare to disembark--significantly Tenerife is their "safe harbor" as well as La Condesa's--the bond between them is

expressed in joy rather than suffering: "Every face wore its own look of private expectation, anxious joy, tranced excitement and . . . their breathing made a small moaning sound and there was a tight trembling of the whole mass" (p. 365). The first-class passengers, however, on reaching their destination drop all pretense of sociability in their anxiety "to take up their real and separate lives once more" (p. 493).

For these travelers the "continuing city" of St. Paul (p. 361) does not exist; because of moral ignorance and persistent passivity, their city of dreams must necessarily remain unrealized. Their failure to find that city, however, does not deny the possibility of its existence. As the Vera, nearing its final docking, passes the Isle of Wight, Jenny Brown and Elsa Lutz, her cabin mate, see a literal archetype of that city resting on a literal shore:

. . . Jenny was enchanted with the fairy-looking castle standing in a greensward the color of an emerald, surrounded by a small tender woods, and the grass shaven neatly to the shore, she believed she was deceived in her sense of smell, which often brought her strange improbable whiffs of cross currents of air. Now she smelled herbs and freshly cut grass and grazing cows.

"Yes, yes," said Elsa, almost happily. "It is true. I have passed here this is the fourth time and there is always that lovely smell. When I was little I thought maybe heaven would be like that" (pp. 492-493).

A "whiff of heaven" is perhaps all that man in a falling world can experience of a better existence, but the promise and

memory of "heaven" can hint at the glory of the eternal city built without hands.

In the light of these passages the charge of misanthropy and "moral irresponsibility"¹² levied against the novel seems dispelled. Lodwick Hartley, whose article on Ship of Fools has been called "the most balanced and perceptive reading that we have,"¹³ says that it refuses "to shape up either dramatically or thematically to a point where the reader can take hold of it with assurance."¹⁴ The same criticism has been made about Moby Dick, as well as several other masterpieces.

Ship of Fools is a masterpiece of enormous complexity. What Robert Penn Warren says of the short stories is even more appropriate for the novel: Porter's work is "paradoxically both a question asked of life and a celebration of life; and the author . . . knows in her bones that the more corrosive the question asked, the more powerful may be the celebration."¹⁵ And in writing about the poetry of Edith

¹²Daniel Curley, "Katherine Anne Porter: The Larger Plan," The Kenyon Review, XXV (Autumn, 1963), 688.

¹³George Core, "'The Best Residuum of Truth'," The Georgia Review, XX (Fall, 1966), 287.

¹⁴Lodwick, Hartley, "Dark Voyagers: A Study of Katherine Anne Porter's Ship of Fools," The University Review--Kansas City, XXX (Fall, 1963), 90.

¹⁵Robert Penn Warren, "Uncorrupted Consciousness: The Stories of Katherine Anne Porter," The Yale Review, LV (Winter, 1966), 290.

Sitwell, Porter fittingly describes her own work: "Every poem is a love poem, even those towering songs of denunciation out of her counter-passion of hatred for the infamies of life and the willful wrong man does to the image of God in himself."¹⁶

The readers who hope to understand Katherine Anne Porter's fiction thoroughly would do well to keep in mind her view of life as a condition that deserves sharp questioning but also celebration. Although Ship of Fools is essentially a vision of the modern world falling into fragments, the novel also implies meanings that the author states explicitly elsewhere: "when we want something better, we may have it: at perhaps no greater price than we have already paid for the worse."¹⁷ Throughout a long and brilliant career Porter has always paid for truth with her artistic integrity. As a token reimbursement, the least her readers can do is to try to understand her art on its own profound terms.

¹⁶Porter, The Days Before, p. 97.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 202.

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