The Art of Katherine Anne Porter

Vernon A. Young

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq

Recommended Citation


This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Mexico Quarterly by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.
WITH FOUR SHORT NOVELS and barely a score of short stories, Katherine Anne Porter has established herself for posterity as the most flawless realist of her generation, yet not until last year, when The Leaning Tower and Other Stories was published, had she received anything like her due, except from the extreme critical minority. In 1931 she received a Guggenheim fellowship for Flowering Judas, and in 1937, for Flowering Judas and Other Stories, a $2,500 fellowship given by the Book-of-the-Month Club “to an American author whose work has not received from the book-reading public the recognition it deserved, as measured by actual sales.”

One is no longer surprised that literature of moral subtlety and stylistic rectitude may not sell. But Miss Porter’s stories are in the American grain and of the American bone, critical and exploratory; their subject matter is always enthralling, their realism exact, their style lucid and flexible, and if there were no other felicities than these (there are, in fact, many) one would have the right to expect her reputation to be as generally accepted as that, say, of Willa Cather, Ernest Hemingway, or Erskine Caldwell. It is not, and the belated acclaim with which the reviewers at large greeted her last-year’s volume indicated their defensive resolve to praise Miss Porter’s virtues at all costs, even though this collection included fewer of them. The Leaning Tower and Other Stories confirms Miss Porter’s position among the best American writers without, I think, elevating it.

This were niggardly praise, if one did not reflect how secure a position she has already attained, in the view of the above-mentioned minority. Everything can be gained for American fiction by asserting
the honest artistry of this writer's work as a whole, in order to secure her a wider audience. Little can be gained for Miss Porter by raising this particular book above her others; at least, not without more demonstration and comparison than I was able to discover in reviews on the occasion. Before delivering a reluctant disclaimer on the contents of *The Leaning Tower*, I should like to define, if possible, the special gifts and methods by which Miss Porter's art, at its best, has been made eminent.

The variousness of her endowments mocks pedantic analysis and eludes any academic stalking of her "controlling subject." The best one can hope to do is give an account of that variousness, render one's awareness of her skill and her uncommitted wisdom, acknowledge the richness of the reading experience she has, with what few volumes, given us. The real difficulty of anything but description of her work may well be the factor which has embarrassed critical appraisal and retarded public appreciation of that work, since it does not lend itself to dust-jacket summary and simplification.

A beginning can always be made by calling Miss Porter an incomparable stylist, which she is, but the term unfortunately suggests prose for prose' sake, and there is no writing today which is more organically connected with its subject matter than hers. It would be perfectly just to insist that the last four pages of "Old Mortality" or the first four of "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" will stand with any comparable number by any anthologized author of the day; it would be just, but it would also be irrelevant and incomplete. Such passages depend, for their function as illumination, upon what has preceded or what is to follow; in Miss Porter's narratives, the context is all. The rhythm, tone, and imagery of her prose are scrupulously selected, or rather, developed, in keeping with the occasion represented and the person involved. This facility is far more rare in modern fiction than is commonly supposed. To name three conspicuous examples of its absence: any casuistic sequence of Virginia Woolf's incandescent prose could belong to the stream of consciousness of any of her characters, from any of her books in that style; Hemingway's narrative writing, effective in its own way, has always the unique stamp of his personality, whether he is describing a big-game hunt, a bullfight, or Spanish guerrilla warfare; Steinbeck's descriptive pieces are invariably removed, by Biblical cadences and scientific jargon, from the intellectual milieu of the inarticulates with whom he is usually occupied.
This is not the case in Katherine Porter's fiction. Observe, in the following passages, each from a different story, how the author's editing retains the color and background of the character under consideration, the quality of his thinking, the images and vocabulary he would find appropriate to his crisis if he were capable of editing it himself. In the first, from a short story "Theft," an intense young woman, superficially self-assertive, lonely and embittered, living on the literary and economic fringe of New York, is reflecting angrily on the theft of her purse by the janitress:

She remembered how she had never locked a door in her life, on some principle of rejection in her that made her uncomfortable in the ownership of things, and her paradoxical boast before the warnings of her friends, that she had never lost a penny by theft; and she had been pleased with the bleak humility of this concrete example designed to illustrate and justify a certain fixed, otherwise baseless and general faith which ordered the movements of her life without regard to her will in the matter.

In this moment she felt that she had been robbed of an enormous number of valuable things, whether material or intangible: things lost or broken by her own fault, things she had forgotten and left in houses when she moved: books borrowed from her and not returned, journeys she had planned and had not made, words she had waited to hear spoken to her and had not heard, and the words she had meant to answer with; bitter alternatives and intolerable substitutes worse than nothing, and yet inescapable: the long patient suffering of dying friendships and the dark inexplicable death of love—all that she had had, and all that she had missed, were lost together, and were twice lost in this landslide of remembered losses.

In the succeeding paragraphs from "Noon Wine," Mr. Thompson, a poor dairy farmer in the Baptist belt of south Texas, is trying to justify to himself his murder of an obnoxious stranger who had attempted to arrest his hired man, Mr. Helton:

After all, he might have got rid of him peaceably, or maybe he might have had to overpower him and put those handcuffs on him and turn him over to the sheriff for disturbing the peace. The most they could have done was to lock up Mr. Hatch while he cooled off for a few days, or fine him a little something. He would try to think of things he might have said to Mr. Hatch. Why, let's see, I could have just said, Now look here, Mr. Hatch, I want to talk to you as man to man. But his brain would go empty. What could he have said and done? But if he could have done anything else almost except kill Mr. Hatch, then nothing would have happened to Mr. Helton. Mr. Thompson hardly ever thought of Mr. Helton. His mind just skipped over him and went on. If he stopped to think
about Mr. Helton he'd never in God's world get anywhere. He tried to imagine how it might all have been, this very night even, if Mr. Helton were still safe and sound out in his shack playing his tune about feeling so good in the morning, drinking up all the wine so you'd feel even better; and Mr. Hatch safe in jail somewhere, mad as hops, maybe, but out of harm's way and ready to listen to reason and to repent of his meanness, the dirty, yellow-livered hound coming around persecuting an innocent man and ruining a whole family that never harmed him!

The third selection, from "Hacienda," focuses on a bullying, irritated movie producer explaining his troubles while on a train going to a Mexican "location":

... He went on to explain that making good involves all sorts of mysterious interlocking schedules: it must be done by a certain date, it must be art, of course, that's taken for granted, and it must be a hit. Half the chance of making a hit depends upon having your stuff ready to go at the psychological moment. There are thousands of things to be thought of, and if they miss one point, bang goes everything!... He sighted along an imaginary rifle, pulled the trigger, and fell back exhausted. His whole life of effort and despair flickered like a film across his relaxed face, a life of putting things over in spite of hell, of keeping up a good front, of lying awake nights fuming with schemes and frothing with beer, rising of mornings gray-faced, stupefied, pushing himself under cold showers and filling himself up on hot coffee and slamming himself into a fight in which there are no rules and no referee and the antagonist is everywhere. "God," he said to me, "you don't know. But I'm going to write a book about it...."

This genius for stylistic verisimilitude is displayed at even greater length in the short story "Magic," where, with an extraordinary economy and deceptive simplicity, a kind of depersonalized horror is evoked from a Creole servant's tale of black magic—or "Rope," a sardonically humorous incident of domestic incompatibility which, told entirely in indirect discourse, accumulates a tragi-comic, nightmarish intensity. One might elaborate on this aesthetic integrity that exercises so perfect a tact in its choice of exact perspective and prose manner, but examples of technical virtuosity do scant justice to the wholeness of Miss Porter's artistry. The wholeness is indispensably assisted by the craftsmanship; it is sustained in the memory of the reader as the result of the searching gaze with which Miss Porter scrutinizes the context of the single experience.

Precisely this scrutiny is what separates her from the ruck of writers who proceed from the idea to the fact, from the general to the particular. In her short stories, especially, the concrete experience
assumes whatever universality the sensitive reader is able to construct from it. Like all disciplined practicers of her craft (and for her equal in this direction at the same level of skill, one must return to Henry James), she does not urge the extrinsic significance. She resists all temptation to shape her people or events falsely, to prove that life means well or means badly or means nothing. She never woos us with obvious injustices, as Caldwell does, or intensifies the grotesqueries and brutality of her material (which often suggests the opportunity) in the way of Steinbeck or Faulkner. With no dialectical thesis to substantiate, she has all the experience that comes within her sight to select from and reveal.

The quality of negation ever present in her work is neither romantic nor nihilistic but the sum of her brooding recognition of the wasteland of modern life, tempered by a sense of responsibility for examining its origins in the poor: values and the despoiled potentialities of its citizens. That she is cognizant of the social scheme that has been produced by, and in its turn, reproduces, the conditions she has striven to translate into literary art, we have her own measured words for:

For myself, and I was not alone, all the conscious and recollected years of my life have been lived to this day under the heavy threat of world catastrophe and most of the energies of my mind and spirit have been spent in the effort to grasp the meaning of those threats, to trace them to their sources, and to understand the logic of this majestic and terrible failure of the life of man in the Western world.

This is not dialectic, but dedication.

It is noteworthy that almost all her characters inhabit the fringes, either of the mundane world or of the moral world of decision, enterprise, and coherence. Whether her setting is East-Side New York, a Western newspaper office, or a café in Mexico, the comedy and the anguish are grounded in the fact of tentativeness, of marginal comprehension. Kennerly, the movie producer in “Hacienda,” is the only worldly success in her gallery, and he is as pathetic in the face of the forces which move him as any peon.

Incomprehension and incompatibility—these are her governing themes. Excepting Miranda in “Old Mortality,” no character in a Porter story has an affirmative insight, or, when he has, he lacks the will or the confidence to act upon it. The heroine in “Theft” recognizes her self-defeat but no resolve ensues; the recognition is all. In “Rope,” the
THE ART OF KATHERINE ANNE PORTER

couple’s immersion in recrimination and abuse comes to no decisive break, and no reformation is implied.

He was a love, she firmly believed, and if she had had her coffee in the morning, she wouldn’t have behaved so funny. . . . There was a whippoorwill still coming back, imagine, clear out of season, sitting in the crab-apple tree calling all by himself. Maybe his girl stood him up. Maybe she did. She hoped to hear him once more, she loved whippoorwills . . . He knew how she was, didn’t he?

Sure, he knew how she was.

The catalyst of marital habit has remained unchanged. The reader’s desire for a categorical denouement is first disarmed and then repudiated by the comic spirit, just as it is in “That Tree,” where the journalist’s discernment of his wife’s limitations (and, incidentally, of his own) halts at the point when one might expect it to be enforced. (“The Leaning Tower” is Miss Porter’s only unsuccessful application of this method, as I shall later demonstrate.) If, as Joseph Wood Krutch has aphorized, tragedy judges a man by his heroism, comedy by his intelligence, then Miss Porter has comic genius, though, in her behalf, one might extend Mr. Krutch’s definition to involve the ironic perception of creatures behaving neither heroically nor intelligently.

This psychologically monochromist treatment may account for the reluctance, or inability, of the common reader to accept Miss Porter’s paramountcy. Complete and dramatic pessimism or complete affirmation attract attention. Both Ernest Hemingway and Willa Cather have been best-sellers in their time. One will not find, in Miss Porter’s work, that continuous, stylized heightening of experience that Hemingway offers, and there is a whole body of criticism to maintain that such heightening is the sine qua non of first-rank fiction. One usually concurs, yet the exception that vanquishes the rule had been committed in advance by Tolstoy’s realism, the quality of which (no other comparison is intended) Miss Porter’s most nearly resembles in its seeing around and under a situation, unbeguiled by dramatic polarities that might more easily court the favor of relaxed readers. Any effect of inconclusiveness is abrogated by faultless structure; aesthetic completeness is exhibited by the form of her stories, making dialectic simplification unnecessary.

Willa Cather owes her success with the public less, I think, to her subtlety of palette (her wish “to make the style count for less and less and the people for more and more,” a wish devoutly consummated
by Miss Porter with less vagueness of execution) than to the central heroism of her attitude. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* appealed to those who, besides needing the regional or religious frisson, wanted their pioneer adventure untinctured by the severities of realism. *The Professor's House*, probably her best novel, educes its superiority from the unquestionably romantic figure of its professor, and from his moving renunciation of the will-to-death inspired, in large part, by Tom Outland's unquestioning faith.

In Miss Porter's world, closer than Cather's to the one we daily inhabit, the heroic stance is rarely taken, and if we miss in her stories the solace of exaltation, we receive in exchange the more instructive rewards of intensified observation not unwarmed by critically handled understanding. Miss Porter's sympathies are tough of texture, not easily strained by humanitarian credulity. It would be unwise to infer that she "loves people." Running through her pages there is an infinite sensitivity toward the pathos of the general human situation. When she examines the specific situation, however, she discards any assumption of pity. It is as though she had withdrawn herself from any possible involvement, the better to extract the truth from her material, not in the manner of the earlier "detached" realists who so grimly kept their distance that they impoverished their intuitive powers, but as if she had made herself a passive but sentient receptacle. Her treatment of the dispossessed, always justly emphatic, never descends to special pleading; indisputably aware of what is glibly called "class warfare," she is more profoundly aware of the warfare within the individual that may drive him, as well from cowardice or egotism as from need, into identifying himself with a faction.

There is not a more mordacious illustration of politico-revolutionary psychology in modern fiction than in "Flowering Judas." One is ready to believe that like Laura, the heroine of the story, Miss Porter has rejected "kinship in one monotonous word. No. No. No. She draws her strength from this one holy talismanic word which does not suffer her to be led into evil. Denying everything, she may walk anywhere in safety, she looks at everything without amazement." I should not care to push the parallel too far, for obviously Miss Porter does not deny everything, but certainly she denies and resists the opportunities of sociological over-simplification as passively and artfully as Laura resists the benevolent anarchy of Braggioni, "the professional lover of humanity."
Ruth Benedict, the anthropologist, has written that "No man ever looks at the world with pristine eyes." He looks at it, she would have us understand, always with the eyes of his special group, race, or culture background. In such stories as "María Concepción" and "Flowering Judas," Miss Porter comes as near to a pristine view as it is possible for anyone but an anthropologist, perhaps, to acquire. By what manner of mental osmosis she can depict such psyches as those of María and Juan Villegas, without a hint of judicial patronage, remains one of the miracles of her art. Not the least amazing of her abilities is this power to exercise double vision: the fruitful perceptions of her own experience through the "conscious and recollected years," and the unblinking objectivity which can dramatize the alien plights of María, Laura, or Mr. Thompson.

A highly developed taste for irony is undoubtedly the controlling factor here. Irony perceives the disparity between the act and its supposed value, thereby freeing its possessor to look unqualifiedly at the foreign experience with both his own and the foreigner's eyes. At this point, the anthropologist and the novelist need the same attributes; the novelist, however, must retain the sensitized observation that the strictly anthropological approach might find it necessary to surrender. This attribute, whether of irony or science, may be the most important one in Miss Porter's possession and the salient reason for her success with many of her stories of childhood. Besides the sympathy and bittersweet recollection which she has patently expressed in them, irony has commanded her fidelity to the intelligent ambivalence one ought to experience before the child predicament. And it is irony again which administers to that quality of negation which flows from shrewd uncertainty, from the recognition of the tricks of flux, not the dogmatic negation which closes forever the circle of possibilities. In each of her short novels, irony has the last word, quite literally, and an examination of them will be profitable for a more extended statement of both her art and her attitude.

"Old Mortality," the most complex and subtle of her novels, in a mere eighty-odd pages, records the substance of a passing generation of the South of 1885 to 1912. With none of the florid nostalgia and provincial didacticism of the historical novels of Elizabeth Madox Roberts and her followers or imitators, Miss Porter evokes, with a vivid handful of characters, the positive flavor of an age dying of the tension between its adamant prohibitions and its desperate prodigali-
ties. The terrible frustrations, sexual and financial and spiritual, are exposed to the discerning eyes of Miranda who grows into and out of this environment.

The subject of the novelette is simply this: the growing up of Miranda, through her childhood years of alternating belief in and doubt of the "romantic" existence of her elders to the day when, after a marriage undertaken, apparently, in desperation, she returns to visit her family and sees her alienation from them with sudden and vindictive clarity. Her apprehension of her own isolation and her tremulous wonder at her own possibilities close the novel with one of the most eloquent and disturbing passages to be found in Miss Porter's pages. This writer has read that passage a dozen times and cannot control a quite uncritical excitement of the blood at the poignance of Miss Porter's intelligent and fearful disclosure of the brink at which Miranda stands.

What is the truth, she asked herself as intently as if the question had never been asked, the truth, even about the smallest, the least important of all the things I must find out? and where shall I begin to look for it? Her mind closed stubbornly against remembering, not the past but the legend of the past, other people's memory of the past, at which she had spent her life peering in wonder like a child at a magic-lantern show. Ah, but there is my own life to come yet, she thought, my own life now and beyond. I don't want any promises, I won't have false hopes, I won't be romantic about myself. I can't live in their world any longer, she told herself, listening to the voices back of her. Let them tell their stories to each other. Let them go on explaining how things happened. I don't care. At least I can know the truth about what happens to me, she assured herself silently, making a promise to herself, in her hopefulness, her ignorance.

The last two words, of course, affirm Miss Porter's genius. Without them, the experience would still stand at the center of her preoccupation with the questing heart and mind. With them, it signals her knowledge of the limitations imposed inexorably by custom and fallibility upon the most wary. For one knows that Miranda, celebrating what Emerson called "the integrity of the observing self," may yet succumb to the banality of the years and, like the elders whom she is rejecting, will likely become hedged in, if not by the boundaries of social pattern, by the barriers erected by the loss of self.

"Pale Horse, Pale Rider" is a counterpoise to "Old Mortality." Miranda (the same, we presume) is working during the First-War years on a Western newspaper. The theme of death is the solvent in this
story as emerging life was in "Old Mortality." The cruel shifts of poverty, the cheap jingoism of the war years, the general atmosphere of physical and national destruction, have imprisoned Miranda's spirit. She meets the challenge of the oppressive penury of her days with that make-shift courage and metallic wit which urban living demands of its victims, but not even the healthy, soap-smelling presence of her gentle but inarticulate sweetheart, on leave before going overseas, dispels the odor of death in her nostrils.

She liked him, she liked him, and there was more than this, but it was no good 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.

This certitude is psychosomatic at its source; even as Miranda intuits the presence of decay, she is struck down by influenza. Thereafter, in an effectively beautiful delirium sequence, her conscious will-to-death battles with the deep-down will-to-live. She recovers, almost in spite of her own desire, to find that the war is over and that Adam, her sweetheart, exposed to her contagion, has died in a camp hospital. She faces the resurgence of life in her with the same outraged anger that seizes Granny Weatherall, in the short story which bears her name, before the onslaught of death, humiliated beyond expression by the enormity of this conspiracy of nature. Reluctant to leave the tranquility of her womb-like delirium, she averts her gaze from the face of life.

At night, after the long effort of lying in her chair, in her extremity of grief for what she had so briefly won, she folded her painful body together and wept silently, shamelessly, in pity for herself and her lost rapture. There was no escape. Dr. Hildesheim, Miss Tanner, the nurses in the diet kitchen, the chemist, the surgeon, the precise machine of the hospital, the whole humane conviction and custom of society, conspired to pull her inseparable rack of bones and wasted flesh to its feet, to put in order her disordered mind, and to set her once more safely in the road that would lead her again to death.

The Miranda of "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" wishes to reject everything in order to die, as the Miranda of "Old Mortality" had wished to reject everything, even love, in order to live. "I hate love," the earlier Miranda had thought, "I hate loving and being loved, I hate it." Possessing and being possessed is unthinkable for the freedom of spirit which she envisaged and hungered for. Later, continuity itself is too
great a burden, the possibilities are temporarily played out. Life will go on, but the second Miranda stands at an apex of uncertainty no less fraught with danger than the boundless anticipation of her earlier self. The novel ends on a note of appalling irony.

No more war, no more plague, only the dazed silence that follows the ceasing of the heavy guns; noiseless houses with the shades drawn, empty streets, the dead cold light of tomorrow. Now there would be time for everything.

This is as far as the Miranda cycle has been recorded; if its roots are as autobiographical as the numerous appearances of Miranda suggest, especially in the childhood experiences which make up the bulk of Miss Porter’s last volume, we may be permitted to hope for a further development of her confrontation of life. Those who are titillated by the correspondencies between an author’s life and his fiction have virgin territory to explore in these two novels, in “Hacienda” and “That Tree” (where the Miriam of “Old Mortality” reappears) as well as in the short stories in The Leaning Tower. All of these certainly seem to testify to the dependence of much of Miss Porter’s art on her own or her shared experience. This essay will stop at the border of any attempt to reconstruct her personality from her work or vice versa. The finished products have their own existence; and there remain a sufficient number of her stories to confound the seeker after biographical origins.

“Noon Wine” is one of them. Published in the same volume with the Miranda novels, it is as different from them in subject matter and method as if authored by another. Dramatic in structure, the development of its stark and pathetic action is the best thing of its kind since Ethan Frome. To a small south Texas farm at the turn of the century comes Olaf Helton, a mild, taciturn, hard-working Swede. For nine years he works as the hired hand of Mr. and Mrs. Thompson, a land-poor, God- and society-fearing couple; by his industry he rescues them from at least the outer periphery of poverty. When Mr. Homer T. Hatch, “a man who should be fat, ordinarily, but who might have just got over a spell of sickness,” a man who, when he laughed, showed “rabbit teeth brown as shoe-leather”—when this repulsive interloper tries to arrest Helton as an escaped lunatic, Mr. Thompson splits his head open with an ax, but not before Hatch has knifed Mr. Helton. Mr. Thompson is acquitted by a jury, but he cannot make his neigh-
bors or even his wife believe that it was a murder committed not in cold blood but in defense of Mr. Helton. When his own children begin to eye him suspiciously, he commits suicide.

In bare outline, these are the events of the story, but such a synopsis meagerly suggests the resources employed in their telling: the evenly paced introduction of the Thompsons' household, the faithfully observed instances of gathering rural comfort as the "furriner" eases manual burdens and plays the song of noon wine on his harmonica, the leisurely, hypnotic scene leading up to the killing, where Homer T. Hatch and Mr. Thompson, on a sweltering afternoon, cut their tobacco plugs and discuss Olaf Helton's character, the baffled casuistry of Mr. Thompson at the collapse of his social esteem, and the last grim paragraph, deadly irony of action matching the irony of reflection which terminated the other novels.

... Taking off his right shoe and sock, he set the butt of his shotgun along the ground with the twin barrels pointed towards his head. It was very awkward. He thought about this a little, leaning his head against the gun mouth. He was trembling and his head was drumming until he was deaf and blind, but he lay down flat on the earth on his side, drew the barrel under his chin and fumbled for the trigger with his great toe. That way he could work it.

This is simple narrative at its best, lacking the intellectual subtleties of Miranda's stories, but clean in its own strong outlines like a piece of good wood carving. Here Miss Porter has beaten John Steinbeck on his own ground. Compare her unaffected delineation of Olaf Helton with Steinbeck's gratuitous Lenny, who remains, as Mark Van Doren dubbed him, "the Little Nell of the twentieth century."

It is all the more surprising, in view of these successful variations in form, that "The Leaning Tower" should fail just where it might have been expected to succeed, in effectual irony. The merits of the novel cannot be denigrated—they are the omnipresent ones of Miss Porter's style: the double attentiveness to pictorial precision and to "intellectual physiognomy"; the prose which, while it serves the interests of the ear, observes the proprieties of functional decorum; the confident control over the nexus of truth and poetry. Still, one can, I believe, question the larger purpose to which these merits should contribute. It is this purpose which I feel to be wanting and, therefore, if totality of form is the central standard for a novel, long or short, limiting to the dimensions of the study at hand. Since the success of
this novel depends mainly on its progression, a fairly detailed outline of its plot is in order.

The occasion of this study is confined to five days in Berlin in December, 1931. Charles Upton, a young American tentatively embarking on an artistic career, is moving from a dismal hotel whose air is "mysteriously oppressive," to cheaper and, he hopes, more pleasant lodgings. The apartment house to which he moves is managed by a Viennese woman who, like most of her countrymen, has seen more prosperous and authoritative days. During negotiations for his room, Charles carelessly injures a small plaster replica of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, a souvenir of the landlady's Italian journey years before. Her consternation at the accident seems inordinate to Charles. He meets three other inhabitants of the house: Hans, a Heidelberg student, cherishing his new dueling scar; Herr Bussen, a starving mathematics student, and Tadeusz Mey, a young, cynically gay, Polish pianist. Herr Bussen attempts to kill himself, but the others agree to pretend that he is merely a victim of food poisoning, as he asserts. On New Year's Eve, Charles accompanies the young men to a cabaret where they all get very drunk, argue rather pointlessly but not vehemently about national aims and personalities. Behind the badinage looms Hans' need of pure power, the fat Otto's incipient lean-Nordic worship, and the Pole's wistful frivolity combined with his dark knowledge of national pride and shame. The tension of the argument is relaxed by women and song, with everyone joining in the chorus of a popular lyric, "their laughing faces innocent as lambs at play."

When Charles, very drunk, returns to his room, he sees that the Leaning Tower has been mended:

Leaning, suspended, perpetually ready to fall, but never falling quite, the venturesome little object—a mistake in the first place, a whimsical pain in the neck, really, towers shouldn't lean in the first place; ... yet had some kind of meaning in Charles' mind. Well, what? He tousled his hair and rubbed his eyes and then his whole head and yawned himself almost inside out. What had the silly little thing reminded him of before? There was an answer if he could think what it was, but this was not the time.

And there, or soon after, Miss Porter leaves him, hoping, through his haze of drunkenness, that he will learn what it is that seems to be threatening him.

I submit that this is an unsuccessfully subtle ending, and a failure
on the author's part to focus the full force of illumination on Charles Upton's experience. Indirection is not necessarily a virtue in a novel; it may well conceal an evasion by the novelist of an honest contest with his own implications. Since dishonesty and evasion are the last practices with which I would charge Miss Porter, I can only believe that she thought her novelette to be more suggestive and less explicit than it had been. For if Charles does not grasp the significance of the plaster symbol, he is more obtuse than, by Miss Porter, he had been made out. He had been relatively shy, easily affronted, and socially insecure, but he had also displayed a trenchant satiric insight by his crayon sketching of the ugly Berliners, and though evasive and plainly sociable in the presence of his hosts at the café, had pertinently criticized their arrogant self-love. The reader knows, all along, even without the oblique reference to the unnamed leader's photo in a barber shop, precisely what aspects of evil are dogging Charles' footsteps. Those aspects are nowhere concealed; they are uncompromisingly represented by Miss Porter throughout and are presumably observed by Charles. The ugly sculpture, the heavy, oppressive furnishings, the ill-mannered surveillance, Hans' preposterous pride in his dueling scar: all these are named objects of revulsion. The following paragraph describing a crowd before a toy-and-sugar-pig-shop window is as clearly an indictment of a cultural psyche as it is an astonishingly graphic and aggressive word-painting:

With their nervous dogs wailing in their arms, the people, shameless mounds of fat, stood in a trance of pig worship, gazing with eyes damp with admiration and appetite. They resembled the most unkind caricatures of themselves, but they were the very kind of people that Holbein and Dürer and Urs Graf had, drawn, too: not vaguely, but positively like, their late-medieval faces full of hallucinated malice and a kind of sluggish but intense cruelty that worked its way up from their depths slowly through the layers of helpless gluttonous fat.

After all these unambiguous portents have been duly noted and Tadeusz the Pole has plainly told Hans that the Germans have a great culture but no civilization, it is wholly anticlimactic for Charles to be visited by so tenuous a premonition as he feels before the patched and precarious Leaning Tower. Either he should have been portrayed as having no insight at all, thus enabling the reader to watch his innocent journey through horror with ironic fascination, or as having more sustained perceptions than he is given. In the latter case, the
desperateness and latent brutality which we have observed around him would need fulfillment in a greater denouement than the story has.

Though this novelette fails, in its own right, to establish an illumination of character equal in subtlety to that of "Old Mortality," or a situation equal in dramatic irony to that in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," it is, none the less, a decisive prosecution of a people without dignity or humor in defeat, and a disquietingly fluent addition to Miss Porter's prose achievements. Conceivably it is an earlier work than the others, published later, but this assumption must wait upon a more detailed bibliography than is at present available.

The short stories in this volume, likewise, seem to me to be inferior, in total power, to those in Flowering Judas. "A Day's Work," featuring the domestic tribulations of a henpecked Irish loafer, is amusing and pathetic. In the hands of a lesser artist, its Maggie-and-Jiggs background would have impelled it into bathos. Under Miss Porter's guidance, no cliché of situation or speech is tolerated; staunch avoidance of patness is one of her greatest gifts. The opening paragraphs of "The Old Order" provide a superlative handling of her obsessive subject—the rituals of domesticity, the sacred and comically profane aspects of the war of the generations. Yet the portrait does not dissolve into scene (as it literally did in "Old Mortality"); it is too obviously a reminiscence and needs the kind of crisis that crystallized the pathos in "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall." The remaining studies (or recollections), of childhood, are peerless of their kind, but at most they are vignettes. My favorite among these is "The Circus," in which for the child Miranda, her first circus is an ordeal of horror. The climax of the event is embodied in one of the most startling sentences in the book. "The man on the wire, hanging by his foot, turned his head like a seal from side to side and blew sneering kisses from his cruel mouth."

All these stories are marked by Miss Porter's characteristically meticulous workmanship. It is simply that they appear to stand in even closer relation to herself than do the more objective earlier stories, and one's enjoyment of them is inhibited by this proximity. One cannot fail to recognize, however, that if this collection does not surpass the earlier ones, it has felicities that no respecter of truth and craft in fiction can afford to ignore.

If one wishes to estimate, with any finality, the value of Miss Porter's contribution to American literature, one will finally add to
her perfection of form her disclosure, and it is hers alone, of how immensely difficult, for all but the stupid and the cruel, is the task of sheer day-by-day living in our time—and what precarious victories of moral understanding it is possible to achieve. The fullness of her disclosure, neither stunted by naturalism nor bloated by romanticized aggravation, is the criterion by which any American realism should be gauged.

It is impossible, as well as presumptuous, to forecast the nature of her future production in fiction. No living writer promises more. Her short stories have already placed her beyond anyone now working in that genre. One can safely declare that if, with her past excellencies, she can contrive longer novels with greater social scope and dramatic complexity, she will be nothing less than the great American novelist that our age has demanded, and presumed it deserves.