CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION
Katherine Anne Porter belongs to a century marked predominantly by cultural heterodoxy. It is an era in which contradictory systems, attitudes and philosophies exist side by side. As Donald Heiney observes, "It is difficult to form a neat judgement of a century which produced both Adolf Hitler and Albert Schweitzer, or to summarize the philosophy of an age in which John Dewey, Jean Paul Sartre and Jacques Maritain were all considered leading philosophers".¹ The dominant movement of the century is unmistakably that of realism. A small but important minority of South American writers, particularly South American, rejected this basic tendency and experimented, instead, with various forms of analytical, romantic or psychological literature. Such writers tend to be highly individualistic and, therefore, difficult to classify under the traditional heading of a literary history.

Katherine Anne Porter belongs to a class of psychological and realistic writers. When the term

"psychological" is applied to Miss Porter's fiction, it should not be imagined that she is a doctrinaire Freudian, or that she is particularly influenced by any of the clinical schools of modern psychology. She is a psychological writer in the sense that she had an insight into the hidden and unconscious thought processes that determine human behaviour. Yet she achieves this insight without recourse to the ingenious stylistic tricks of a Joyce or a Virginia Woolf. Her style is, evidently, outwardly uncomplicated and unpretentious.

As a product of her age, Miss Porter is impelled to write about a society that is haunted from within and threatened from without. Like Henry James she has the imagination of disaster — the particular hall-mark of literary artists in America, which runs from Hawthorne and Melville, through James to Fitzgerald, Faulkner and Hemingway.¹

In addition to the pressure of the time, Katherine Anne Porter's personal life also had a profound impact on her novels. Much of her fiction has the ring of autobiography. Even in stories with protagonists who are in no way identifiable with Miss Porter herself, persons and actions seem more the product of memory than of invention. In her Paris Journal of 1936, she

wrote that the "constant exercise of memory" was the chief occupation of her creative mind. "I must know a story by heart and I must write from memory".  

This almost obsessive urge to draw upon memory, to project herself as if it were in disguise at least in her work places her most clearly in the central tradition or fashion of modern literature. Personal experience provides the creative impetus as well as content and form to much of modern literature.

In fact, very few firmly established facts are available about her life. George Hendrick remarks that Miss Porter herself "has been extremely reticent in revealing biographical information about her early years".  

Katherine Anne Porter, third of the five children of Harrison and Mary Alice Jones, was born in Indian Creek, Texas, in 1894. After her mother's death, the family moved to Kyle, Texas, where the children were cared for by their paternal grandmother, Catherine Anne Porter.


She was a Kentuckian who had moved from Texas shortly after the Civil War and she owned a house in Kyle and a farm nearby, at which she and her grandchildren frequently stayed. The stories of *The Old Order* provide the principal fictional account of the family's life during these years. Miss Porter senior died in 1901. Sometime thereafter, both the house in Kyle and the farm were sold, and Harrison Porter and his family settled in San Antonio in 1904.

The history of her education is sketchy. It is obvious from the available account of her life that she was precocious and strong-willed both as a child and as a teenager, composing stories as soon as she had learnt to write, directing and acting in plays at home, studying dramatics at school, and reading widely. In an interview, published in the *Paris Review* in 1963, she listed some of the reading she did in her youth: Shakespeare's Sonnets which brought her to a "turning point" in her life at the

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1 "Among some facts" Glenway Wescott mentions that 'she went to a convent school, perhaps more than one', and that 'she spent an important part of her girlhood in New Orleans. Perhaps her years in New Orleans were spent at such a school as described in *Old Mortality*.'

age of thirteen; translations from Dante and Homer, from
Ronsard and other French poets; Montaigne; at her father's
suggestion, Voltaire's philosophical dictionary, in an
edition with notes by Smollet; the eighteenth century
novelists; Emily Bronte, Dickens, Thackeray, Henry
James, Hardy.¹ It is not really surprising that at the
age of sixteen she ran away from school, according to
the Paris Review interview, and got married.² Neither
the critical studies, nor the standard biographical
accounts, provide the name of her first husband, her
marriage with whom ended in three years.

Afterwards she moved to Chicago, for she found
that there was no comfortable place in the conservative
Texas society for a young divorcee, who had the
unconventional ambition of becoming a professional
writer. For sometime she was a reporter on a Chicago
newspaper, and even worked several months as an extra
with a movie company. Desperately poor but determined to
be independent, she stayed in Chicago until 1914, when
she got an opportunity to move to Hollywood with the
film company. She then returned to Texas.

² Ibid., p. 89
In the *Paris Review* interview of 1963, she spoke of having been a traveling entertainer at that time, singing Scottish ballads, in a costume she made for herself, "all around Texas and Louisiana". In 1917, she was hired by a Fort Worth Weekly, *The Critic*, as a writer of drama criticism and society gossip. The next year, she moved to Denver, where she became a reporter for the *Rocky Mountain News*.

It appears from the reports of Wescott and others that illness played an important part in the development of Miss Porter's character as an artist. Her medical history too is obscure. According to Wescott, "When she was a girl somewhere in the South, she had to spend months and months in a sanitarium with a grave pulmonary illness, diagnosed as one of the baffling uncommon forms of tuberculosis", Miss Porter spoke of a similar episode just after her tour of Texas and Louisiana as a ballad singer: "And then I was supposed to have T.B., and spent about six weeks in a sanitarium. It was bronchitis, but I was in Denver, so I got a newspaper job". Archer Wisten in the *New York Post* indicates

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1 *Ibid.*, p.113

2 Glenway Wescott, "Katherine Anne Porter Personally", *Images of Truth : Remembrances and Criticism*.

3 "Katherine Anne Porter : An Interview", *Paris Review*. 
that "she contracted tuberculosis in Chicago before her return to Texas in 1914".\(^1\) It appears that she was hospitalized several times as a girl and as a young woman, and in different places. When she was in Denver, she suffered from influenza during the epidemic of 1918. However, the account of her illness differs slightly. But it is clear that she did suffer from spells of illness, apparently quite serious. And this fact does seem to have, as it has in other cases, left a mark on her temperament and disposition, and as a matter of fact her critical illness and the experience she went through is fictionalized in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*. In an interview, Miss Porter admitted that Miranda’s experience with illness and her presentiment of death derived from her own experience during the influenza epidemic of 1918. That experience fictionalized in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, gave her a quasi-mystical insight into the realities of life and death; "I really had participated in death", she said to Barbara Thompson,

"I knew what death was, and had almost experienced it. I had what the Christians call the beatific vision, and Greeks

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1 Archer Wisten, "Presenting the Portrait of An Artist", *New York Post*, 6 May 1937, p. 17
called 'happy day', the happy vision just before death. Now if you have had that and survived it, . . . you are no longer like other people, and there is no use deceiving yourself that you are."  

In 1919, when she had fully recovered from illness, she moved to New York, where she briefly earned a living as a hack and ghost-writer. With the War over, she went to Mexico in 1920 and witnessed the Obregon revolution. Her visit to Mexico was induced by her interest in art. As she explained in "Why I write about Mexico", the country was already familiar to her from her childhood experience in San Antonio, and from the experiences of her father who, she said, had lived part of his youth in Mexico. She speaks of having witnessed then "from the window of a Cathedral a street battle between the revolutionists and the government troops." The visit to Mexico in 1920, however, was the beginning of her active interest in the country and its people which resulted in her most important

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1 "Katherine Anne Porter: An Interview", Paris Review

2 Katherine Anne Porter, The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings, p. 355

3 Ibid.
stories, Flowering Judas, Maria Conception and Hacienda.

Even when she came back to Texas, and started writing for a trade magazine, Mexico was the principal centre of her intellectual life. She wrote articles on Mexican culture and politics, and travelled again in Mexico gathering material on folk art. In this way, for at least ten years, she remained involved with Mexico. In 1920's she went back to New York and wrote various reviews for such publications as The Herald Tribune, The Nation, and The New Republic. Along with this in 1922, she wrote Maria Conception. This was the first of her published stories which she chose to preserve in the Collected Edition. This was based on her experience in Mexico. Another Mexican story Flowering Judas, was the title story of her first collection, published in 1930. The same year, she was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship and in the following year, she returned to Mexico.

This trip was particularly unpleasant due to a painful experience with Hart Crane, who also in Mexico and had on a Guggenheim fellowship. He rented a house next door to Miss Porter. The two were close friends. Unfortunately, the friendship ended because of his
abusive nature, public drunkenness and homosexuality. Nevertheless, there is no evidence that she ever allowed anyone to distract her very long from her work, when she truly wanted to stay at it. But she had been genuinely fond of Crane, and as an artist, she admired him. It seems likely that the end of their friendship contributed a great deal to the mood of disillusionment that oppressed her when she went to Europe in 1931.

Miss Porter's voyage from Veracruz to Bremerhaven, aboard a German ship, provided the basic material for the long novel Ship of Fools, which appeared thirty years later. An interesting note on the continuity of Miss Porter's imaginative experience is George Hendrick's view that in her account of the voyage, "incidents aboard the ship recall her encounter with Hart Crane in Mexico."¹

She stayed in Berlin where she met Hitler, Goering, and Goebbels, all of whom she saw as "detestable and dangerous". The Berlin experience yielded material for the story Leaning Tower, as well as for Ship of Fools.

¹ George Hendrick, Katherine Anne Porter, pp. 126-131
In 1933, she married Eugene Pressly, a member of the American Foreign Service. She lived several years in Paris, compiling a French song book and writing fiction. In 1934, Hacienda was published, and in 1935 an enlarged edition of the Flowering Judas Collection came out. When Noon Wine was given the Book-Of-the Month Club award in 1937, she achieved her first considerable success.

Divorced from Pressly, she married Albert Erskine, Jr., of the Louisiana State University faculty in 1930, and in 1939, the Pale Horse, Pale Rider volume was published.

In 1942 she divorced Albert Erskine. In 1943, she was elected a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters. The Leaning Tower and Other Stories appeared in 1944. Her position in the Leland Stanford University as Writer-in-residence, to which she was appointed in 1949, was the first of several posts she held during the next twelve years. A collection of her critical and personal essays, The Day Before, was published in 1952. Holiday, published in 1966, received the O. Henry Memorial award in 1962.
During the late 1950's she returned to sustained work on the long delayed novel *Ship of Fools*. In the beginning the provisional titles of the novel were *No Safe Harbor* and *Promised Land*, which are interesting as revelatory of her intention. Miss Porter finished this novel in the spring of 1961. Although after *Ship of Fools*, she published no new fiction, she received both the Pulitzer prize and the National Book Award for fiction in 1966.

Almost all her works in general, as well as her remarks in her Critical Essays about her art, often invite biographical attention. She has repeatedly emphasized her reliance upon memory for story material. She insists upon the artist's right to reshape the material provided by memory. She writes,

"Yet in this endless remembering which surely must be the main occupation of the writer, events are changed, reshaped, interpreted again and again in different ways... because it is the intention of the writer to write fiction after all — real fiction, not a roman a clef, or a thinly disguised personal confession which better belongs to the psychoanalyst's seance".¹

¹ Katherine Anne Porter, "Noon Wine: The Sources", in *The Collected Essays and Occasional Writing*, p. 468
And the background experience includes "legend" and acquired knowledge, that is, knowledge acquired from reading as well as personal experience. She also said: "My safety ground as a writer is based on what I saw or heard or experienced, a reality which I never mix up with fiction, only elaborate on". 1

The critics of Miss Porter have expressed doubts about her "Catholicism". Yet M.M. Liberman refers to her Roman Catholic upbringing as if it were a matter of indisputable fact without presenting any new supporting evidence, and blandly remarks that "Miranda's family ... are, as were Miss Porter's, Catholics". 2

As she presented it in the personal essay 
*Portrait of Old South*, dated 1944, her own family history is strikingly similar to Miranda's (of *Miranda Stories*). 3

The portrait of Miss Porter's grandmother in the essay

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3 Katherine Anne Porter, "Portrait Old South" in *Collected Essays and Occasional Writings*, p. 160
is much more sentimental than the characterization of Sophia Jane in the stories of Miranda. Though Miss Porter may adhere to her statement that she never gets reality mixed up with fiction, she has not tried to avoid such confusion. The portrait of the grandmother in the essay has very close similarity to the portrait of Sophia Jane in the stories. In fact, her real feelings about her father's mother have been fully expressed in the Stories of The Old Order.

Harry John Mooney rightly remarks

"she writes like a true artist out of deep inner necessity. This necessity, however, has a purpose and direction: it seeks to trace the reason for the failure of men's behavior in our times and therefore her stories are stories in concrete and specific instances of human behavior... the actual pivot of her fiction is the diverse and baffling conduct of man". 1

The second most important point of Miss Porter's fiction lies in her remark in Preface to Flowering Judas, later reprinted in The Days Before. This also made clear

the purpose of her work: "she is attempting in all her stories to render intelligible the chaos of the present age, the majestic and terrible failure of the life of man in the Western world, by means of the order and form which only art (or religion) can achieve". 1

All her works including her long and short stories and a novel together may be thought of as a kind of history of man's moral and intellectual failure. They faultlessly express the necessary paradox and ambiguity of the time. She writes in The Days Before, "My whole attempt has been to discover and understand human motives, human feelings, to make a distillation of what human relations and experiences my mind has been able to absorb". 2 Obviously, it is the psychology of human relations which interests her most. Each of her stories is an attempt to elucidate some particular problem or mystery in man's behaviour.

The most important feature of her stories is the


2 Ibid; p. 125
sense of alienation. The pervasiveness of the sense of isolation, withdrawal and denial, is both an instance and a natural consequence of the fact that her art is a profound expression of her nature. Katherine Anne Porter's essays, like her fiction, also fall into the characteristic pattern of alienation, as Wescott observes: "On the philosophical-religious level, this involves a denial of every kind of dogma and a strong advocacy of the great tradition of dissent." Paralleling this on the social level is a general rejection of human contact which appears in many guises. Oppression and escape in their various forms permeate the works of Miss Porter. In the next chapter, this particular aspect of her fiction, alienation, will be discussed.

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1 Glenway Wescott, *Images of Truth: Remembrances and Criticism*, p. 28