CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Katherine Anne Porter contributed gem-like fiction to American literature for over half a century. A Southerner and a contemporary of Hemingway and Fitzgerald, the amount of her published work is very small though her reputation is high. She has been praised by *Time* and *New York Times*. The *Saturday Review* has placed her in the category of Flaubert, Hawthorne, and James as a story-teller and artist. Her prose has been noted for its brilliance, beauty, polish and lucidity. Edmund Wilson confessed himself to be at a loss of words with which to praise her stories.

Born at the beginning of the last decade of the nineteenth century, she grew up with distinct memories of the Civil War and could say "I am the grand child of a lost war." She experienced the "millennial change" that thrust America into the twentieth century more than her counterparts as the first quarter of the century gave to women particularly, a greater freedom and mobility and, more important, a political voice. She lived through two World Wars, nearly dying in the epidemic of influenza which swept the United States during the first World War. She was in Mexico City during the Obregon Revolution. She was in Berlin during Hitler's rise to power, and it is true that her escort at least on one occasion was Hitler's henchman Herman Goering. For much of her life she roamed the world rootlessly, seeking a place where she could feel at home. Finally, she decided that America was her country and that she did not belong completely to the
North or to the South. She settled at last in Washington, D.C., saying that she must live either "in a howling wilderness or a world capital". Married four times, there was rarely a time when she was not amorously engaged. However, love was never the predominant interest in her life. In her novel *Ship of Fools* one of her characters Jenny Brown warned by a gypsy that the man she is with, is not her real man replies "there are going to be a lot of other things much more interesting in my life than this man, or any other man". So it was for Katherine Anne Porter; her emotional centre, the one continuing thread of her life, was her work as an artist. She gathered material from her past, from her experiences and from her travels for her narrative art.

To consider Porter's childhood is to realize the remarkable nature of her achievement, for no writer can have grown up in more complete literary isolation. She was justifiably proud of her regional uniqueness.

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

And yet she was ashamed of her humble origin and transformed her personal history into a work of art. Instead of frankly acknowledging her poor and obscure background she called herself an aristocratic daughter of the Old South, a member of the "guilt ridden white pillar crowd". The impetus behind both her literary work and the recreation of her own image had their roots in the same source; her inability to accept the distinction between what life is and what it should be. She said: "My own habit of writing fiction has produced a wholesome exercise to my natural
incurable tendency to try to wrangle the sprawling mess of our existence in this bloody world into some kind of shape. Biographers have felt that revelations about her life constituted some cruel kind of exposure. The story of her life, however, is important because the inter-weaving of fact and fiction which confuses the biographer is highly revealing for the literary critic. As Porter herself said once "My fiction is reportage. Only I do something to it. I arrange it and it is fiction but it happened."

She was brought up by a strict, puritan and repressive Grandmother who was however a great formative influence in her life. The grandmother, for all her faults, represented the only source of security she had. She said later that the one dependable thing in her childhood was the wrath of her grandmother. Porter's childhood ended sharply with the grandmother's death when she was eleven. The death was followed by a whole string of disasters. Porter's world completely fell apart and she was in a single blow deprived of any sense of family dignity, material security, or religious certainty. These changes were all the more aggravated because they coincided with the onset of adolescence. Inspite of all this trouble, perhaps because of it, no other period yielded so richly to her fiction. It was thirty years before she achieved full control of her métier and when she did so, she found her most successful material in reshaping and reordering the experiences of these years. From them she created the short novels "Old Mortality" and "Noon Wine" and the short story sequence "The Old Order".
The only academic qualification she had was a year's training at St. Thomas School in San Antonio where she learnt singing, elocution, and acting. Here she also made her acquaintance with works of Shakespeare and other classicists. Although she planned to be a writer, she exiled herself from literary centres, prolonging her apprenticeship. She concentrated on English and Continental classics till she discovered Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913) soon after it appeared and continued to read Miss Cather's novels as they were published. Along with *O Pioneers!* she was also reading Henry James, W.B. Yeats, and Joseph Conrad. Joyce's *Dubliners* came to her not as a shock but as a revelation, a further unfolding of the deep world of the imagination. Thomas Hardy, Katherine Mansfield, E.M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound were also important writers for Miss Porter.

Her long isolation led to a deeply personal manner of writing. Wescott called this a "profound, inward, hidden way of working". She exhibited an extremely rigorous selectivity, which permitted only a very small portion of her work to be published. When her first work appeared, she seemed as a writer to have sprung full grown out of the head of Zeus, so superb was her writing. This assumption discounted the care and the patience involved in the writing of and the decision to publish each story only after having destroyed "trunk loads" of earlier written work. Correspondingly Porter had a concise way of writing all her own. She had a verbal fastidiousness and a strong flexible style. Her tendency was to reject every non-essential in the interest of smoothness and intensity and even reduce punctuation.
to the lowest possible minimum. In "Flowering Judas" and "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" especially, we see the fluid language of the mind in its dreams and wanderings. Like her style Porter's structures also, (except in Ship of Fools) are remarkably compressed. "Old Mortality" and "Noon Wine" are examples of richness in a small space. Some times however, this compression which makes the thematic force so strong distorts the dramatic structure of the individual story and makes it defective.

Porter's first marriage led to her conversion to Catholicism. Many aspects of this religion appealed to her. She loved the Latin liturgy, the Mass, the Church music, and the symbolism inherent in Word and Gesture. But with her deep need to believe was also an equally deep skepticism. She rejected orthodox beliefs such as: Victorian morality based on orthodox dogmas like original sin; the existence of a personal God; the purposiveness of all human life; the need for regarding man's life on earth as a preparation for a reformed spiritual life after death. The traditional dogmas of Orthodox Christianity, Miss Porter came to believe, could only hinder the artist, who must find his own answers, his own truths. In a violent attack on T.S. Eliot for his criticism of Thomas Hardy, Miss Porter renounced the tradition of orthodoxy and accepted with Hardy "another tradition of equal antiquity, equal importance, equal seriousness, a body of opinion running parallel throughout history to the body of law in church and state: "the tradition of dissent". Intent upon probing her own world for the meaning of
what she saw, heard, felt, thought, Miss Porter was unwilling to relinquish her calling, the art of fiction, by accepting the catechism taught by the Catholic school; but she conceded that "there is at the heart of the universe a riddle no man can solve, and in the end God may be the answer". Perhaps what Miss Porter most deplored about organized religion is its misdirection of men, its cynicism and false other worldly orientation. Men's mysticism, she complained, "has been harnessed rudely to machinery of the most mundane sort, and has been made to serve the ends of an organization which ruling under divine guidance, has rules very little better, and in some respects, worse than certain man-made systems of government". Organized religion, she said had committed "the most savage crimes against human life for the love of God". Miss Porter believed that men bring evil upon themselves by attributing human ills to divine providence and by preparing for a spiritual after-life instead of concerning themselves with the every day world, she insists upon the efficacy of social reform: "man could make the earth a more endurable place for himself if he would". The proper concern of man, according to Miss Porter, is the visible world; insisting upon a humanistic, this-worldly orientation, for "both malevolence and benevolence originated in the mind of man, and the warring forces (are) within him alone, such plan as (exists) in regard to him he (has) created for himself, his Good and his Evil (are) alike the mysterious inventions of his own mind". The tangible world was the one Miss Porter would have. So she "strained and struggled outward to meet it, to absorb it, to understand it, to be part of it".
As a critic of plays Porter scorned the inevitable happy endings, mocked at the subject matter (love presented as an ethereal affair ending sedately at the altar with an exchange of vows, and marriage as a roseate picnic) and attacked weak plots. However, while Porter objected to the simpering heroines and stereotyped heroes and villains of the theatrical fare she did not question or reject the basic characteristics of melodrama itself. She accepted the polarisation of good and evil and the division of characters into saints and sinners. She mocked at the exaggerated, unconvincing, stereotyped appearance of the usual villain, but did not question the existence of the villain. She said that she had a "long standing fascination with the psychology of villainy" and added that he deserves some admiration because after all, "it takes imagination and real nerve to become a first-class sinner". She has also said that a sinner is more interesting than a saint because "he is often a trifle more sincere". As a result of her recognition of the positive qualities to be found in villains, her attention moved from them to the passive heroine, and it was on this figure that she heaped all her scorn and contempt. The shift of Porter's attention from the villain to the saintly heroine was a permanent one and eventually formed the corner stone of her moral philosophy. She felt that the evil doers are not the most reprehensible people on earth, the people who really need to be watched are the so called innocents who stand by and allow others to perpetuate evil. However, the philosophy which provided her theme was also one of the greatest factors of limiting her work. Her view of the world
peopled by villains, victims, and people of dubious virtue allowed her characters little scope for growth and change. In fact she could not imagine characters with the capacity to develop, and she was never able to create them. For a short story this hardly mattered, but in a novel she had to find a way to substitute for characters unable to mature in the normal way.

Porter's puritan upbringing led her to attempt a biography (never finished) of the seventeenth century New England theologian Cotton Mather. Her interest in Cotton Mather was the natural out-growth of preoccupations rooted in her Southern childhood. Texas at that time was tainted with middle class puritanism which saw no different between wine-drinking, dancing, card-playing and adultery. According to Porter, there were plenty of

totalitarians who seemed to hold that every human activity except breathing was a sin.

The atmosphere affected her profoundly as she was always haunted by childhood memories - by the tangible devil, whom she thought of as a creature dressed in red who lived in her grandmother's closet, the revival meetings with the "singing and praying and shouting and tears and sacred joy", and the mourners's bench for repenting sinners. Such occasions left Porter with a deep interest in mass hysteria and became her touchstone for political and religious frenzy. When she watched a Hitler rally in Berlin, she said it reminded her of a Methodist revival meeting. Mather's biography led her to Salem where she absorbed a powerful literary influence - Nathaniel Hawthorne. His point of view, moral outlook and whole imaginative disposition were in
tune with her own and helped her to find her way. Like Porter, Hawthorne imagined a world peopled by saints and sinners and he like her focussed less upon them than upon virtuous people who coldly promoted the workings of evil. His great interest was in the egotistical saints, the high-minded sowers of discord like Chillingworth and Hollingworth. Robert Penn Warren discovered the similarity between the two writers when he wrote that, like Hawthorne, Porter "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 the soul as the Unpardonable Sin". Porter's sketches "The Circus" and "The Grave" both contain echoes of Hawthorne.

Respect for the dignity of the individual, whose complicated life, both conscious and unconscious, can not be explained by theories and impressive words enabled Miss Porter to reject the dogmatic line of political parties as well as religious sects. The artist, she felt can not identify with a party as "all working practical political systems...are based upon and operate in contempt of human life and the individual fate, in accepting any one of them and shaping his mind and work to that mold, the artist dehumanizes himself, unfit himself for the practice of an art". The artist's job is to deal with the true and human world which he himself knows. Thus her own work has been an attempt "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". She admires writers like Katherine Mansfield, who with fine objectivity bares "a moment of
experience, real experience, in the life of some human being; (Miss Mansfield) states no belief, gives no motives, airs no theories, simply presents the reader a situation, a place and a character, and there it is; and the emotional content is present implicitly as the germ is in the wheat. This comes very close to Miss Porter's own method of composition, which was to record objectively her exact memory of life as she knew it, to avoid rationalizations, to trust her reader to find within the story or novel the unifying or informing theme or symbol. Miss Porter begins with an image, an incident, a character; "a section here and a section there has been written—little general scenes explored and developed. Or scenes or sketches of characters which were never intended to be incorporated in the finished work have been developed in the process of trying to understand the full potentiality of the material." At the critical moment, "thousands of memories converge, harmonize, arrange themselves around a central idea in a coherent form, and write a story.

Since Miss Porter's "aesthetic bias, (her) one aim is to tell a straight story and to give true testimony," she was convinced that an artist must retain a close, vital connection with society. She felt that art is not a cult of individual eccentricity nor a modish and exclusive aristocratic pleasure of the few. An artist's responsibility to society is the simple responsibility of any other human being, as he is not separate from the human race. Preferring the kind of art that aims at a perfect realism, Miss Porter expects the artist to write about his own familiar country, the world and people he knows best. Thus her
enthusiasm for such a writer as Willa Cather, who was "a provincial...as provincial as Hawthorne, or Flaubert, or Turgenev, or Jane Austen". Related to Miss Porter's taste for provincial literature is her contention that really good art, must be natural, organic - "a living thing that grows as a tree grows, thrusting up from its roots and saps, knots and fruits and tormented branches, without an uneasy feeling that it should be refined for art's sake".

Certainly for Katherine Anne Porter, the search for truth and the process of artistic creation are one and the same. The artist is not only maker but he is also a seer. Through his act of creation, he gives body to the vision of life which he holds both consciously and unconsciously. She called herself a "witness to life", and we ought to be able to find some pattern of experience and meaning in what she says. Miss Porter indicated before the publication of Ship of Fools that everything she had written had been "fragments of a much larger plan which I am still engaged in carrying out". Hence, one can interpret that her novel is a summarizing testimony, her attempt at a total and transcendent view of life told with all the "truth and tenderness and severity" she was capable of. Yet even in the "fragments" (her stories and novel), we can see the essence of Miss Porter's fiction: her themes, symbols and underlying philosophical logos, and they represent what she 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 in the sickness of a millennial change".

She had once described herself as "a refugee from the Indian
Creek forever searching for the right place to live, the right place to work". There was something sad and lonely about the way she lived. Restless and chronically dissatisfied, staying in fifty different places; barren, rented rooms, half-furnished apartments, a rented house now and then, always in wistful pursuit of something permanent and stable; she yet had a profound and deeply personal commitment to her career as an artist, a commitment that was never abandoned. And as one contemplates the depth and range of her published work, her keen sense of human condition, one could well say that she was always home, always in the right place, but somehow never knew it.

In 1950, Katherine Anne Porter wrote: "I believe, I hope I shall have my place in the story of American literature; even at this point how could they write it and leave me out?" Though her reputation gained very little from the novel or from the stories that appeared after 1956, it was already assured, as she had hoped, by the short fiction written in the first half of her life. For years her stories were published for college students in literary anthologies in the United States. Generations of students read "The Grave", "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall", "Flowering Judas", and "Noon Wine". Slowly the stories have been displaced, not by better ones but by more current favourites. Porter does not deserve to be dislodged by the whims of fashion. The decline in her popularity is an error of judgment.
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