

TRANSFIGURING THE REAL :
PERSONAL AND IMPERSONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY
IN KATHERINE ANNE PORTER'S ART

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for M.M.S.

The literary biographer is faced with two rather different and yet intriguingly and mysteriously connected problems. Once the biographer, often after long and arduous detective work, has unearthed what we call "the facts," there remain the problems of interpreting the factual biographical information. This process, though many would prefer to deny it, is not unakin to the interpretation of a work of art. What, in short, do these revealed facts signify, what do they add up to? To complicate matters, the literary biographer not only has to extrapolate truth from the facts but also from the literary works. Both undertakings are fraught with peril, not least because they are sometimes interconnected. Where does one begin?

The intersection of the outer "facts," the inner life, and the work of art lies in the imagination, that most elusive of all our faculties. It is in the imagination that the writer's work, his life, his self meet on the intense and the most intimate level. Anything can happen there, which is why the imagination is such dangerous territory for those of us who seek to explain. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the literary biographer can hardly afford to neglect his subject's imagination. He must attempt to understand the way in which the imagination engages with and transforms elements of real life into art. The best literary biographies are irradiated, explicitly or implicitly, with a sense of the artist's imagination.

Unfortunately, Katherine Anne Porter's biographer, Joan Givner, ¹

concentrates on the surface of the stories, and even there her interpretations are usually far wide of the mark. This seems to me to stem from a radical failure to understand the meaning of the facts of Katherine Anne Porter's life. I am here referring specifically to Givner's interpretation of those facts about Katherine Anne Porter's family background and early years, facts that evidently were not very easy to come by and for which we owe Mrs. Givner a considerable debt of gratitude.² The facts are there, but as a person and as an artist Katherine Anne Porter eludes Mrs. Givner.

The first sixteen years of Katherine Anne Porter life provided her with the raw material that imagination transformed, in very different ways, into two of her most famous works, the short novels "Old Mortality" and "Noon Wine." It is these two works, among the best she ever wrote, that I want to concentrate on. I want particularly to examine them in the light of the facts of Porter's life. This, as I have already hinted, is far more complicated than might at first appear. Mrs. Givner takes the facts, interprets them by her own light, and attempts to illuminate the stories with her perception of the reality. I shall offer an alternative interpretations of the same facts. It is first necessary to rehearse those facts for which we owe Mrs. Givner so much gratitude.

Katherine Anne Porter was born on 15 May 1890 in Indian Creek, Texas. (We shall see later how even such a fact as straight-forward as a date of birth can be put to use in fiction.) Her grandfather had bought several hundred acres of rich farm land when he came to Texas from Kentucky in 1857. Katherine Anne Porter's father, Harrison Porter, and his brothers were educated in what has been called "the best school in this section of the state",³ and then completed their schooling at a private military academy. Her mother, Mary Alice, was educated at the Coronal Institute, a boarding-school for young ladies in San Marco, Texas. She was graduated first in her class and became, rather predicably for a young woman of her day, a school teacher.

The letters of Harrison and Mary Alice show them to have been educated, literate people. Their language is formal and ornate, following the high Victorian style.⁴ When they married Mr. Porter began farming in Indian Creek, where his wife's parents lived. The Porters were founding members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Indian Creek, and Mr. Porter was superintendant of the church's Sunday school. Just what these facts mean in the social-cultural context of a post-Civil War rural community in the South, we shall return to later.

Mary Alice Porter died of pneumonia when Katherine Anne was two years old. Soon Mr. Porter sold the Indian Creek farm and moved to Kyle, Texas, another rural farming community, where his widowed mother lived. The family shared with the grandmother a cottage she had built for her widowhood — consequently this house was rather small for a family of four children. Mr. Porter was a man of romantic disposition, and his wife's death increased the melancholic side of his romantic nature. He lapsed into a brooding self-pity and devoted himself to memories of his beloved wife. In short, he seems never again to have settled to any profitable work. The family was supported mainly by grandmother Porter and probably also by loans from Mr. Porter's brothers and sisters.

After his mother's death in 1901, Harrison Porter decided to move his family to another town. While he travelled about looking over prospective homes, he left his children with his cousin Ellen Thompson and her husband on their small farm. Mrs. Thompson suffered from vague ill-health, and her husband was an even-tempered, easy-going man. They had two sons and a hired man called Mr. Helton. Just how long the eleven year-old Katherine Anne Porter stayed with these cousins is uncertain — probably not more than a month or two. This episode may seem insignificant, but Mrs. Givner argues that "Noon Wine" is set on this farm, and provides the most truthful picture in Katherine Anne Porter's work of her own immediate family's

economic and school position.

By 1903 when Katherine Anne Porter was thirteen, Mr. Porter had again resettled with his children in San Antonio. They first lived in a large, formerly elegant house, but eventually the lack of money forced them to move into an apartment. Money was somehow found to send Katherine Anne to the Thomas School, a small private establishment. The school had a high social tone, encouraged an interest in art and music, and had a sensible curriculum, particularly strong in literature.

In 1906 at the age of sixteen, Katherine Anne Porter married for the first time. She was to live for seventy-four more years, marry three more times (though she sometimes joked that some of her husbands tended to "slip [her] mind"), have innumerable lovers, live for long periods in Mexico and Europe, and die rich and famous at the age of ninety in 1980. But for our purposes, this sketch of the first sixteen years of her life is sufficient. I want now to look at the way that "Old Mortality" and "Noon Wine" have been and might be interpreted as autobiographical stories of Katherine Anne Porter's early life.

Before the publication of Mrs. Givner's biography, most critics took "Old Mortality" to be autobiographical in the most straight-forward way as reflecting literally the style of the Porter family's life during Katherine Anne's childhood and Katherine Anne's experience at a convent school in New Orleans.⁵ It was also taken to be autobiographical in the deeper sense of reflecting the values with which Porter was inculcated as a child and the conflicts that grew out of those values. Critics were encouraged in both by Katherine Anne Porter herself. She spoke of Miranda, the heroine of the story, as her fictional self. Somewhere along the way, Katherine Anne Porter had seen fit to shed four years from her stated age, and so Miranda is implied in the story to have been born in 1894, the year that, at the time the story was published, Katherine Anne Porter claimed as her own year of birth.

Following this lead, critics assumed that all the superficial details were true, that the picture of Miranda's family — genteelly poor, well-educated, refined, socially prominent people living in large, comfortable, though perhaps not luxurious, houses — was an accurate rendering of the Porter's situation.

Mrs. Givner has found some new, and to her significantly contradictory facts. She argues from that "Old Mortality" is not autobiography but rather what we might call false-autobiography. The picture that Porter presents in "Old Mortality" of her family circumstances is, she argues, almost pure fiction.⁶ Katherine Anne Porter's family lived for the most part in cramped, rude, ungracious houses. Mr. Porter was poor, struggling unceasingly to survive. From these two facts — and one has no reason to doubt the literal truth of them — Mrs. Givner extrapolates proof of the Porter's position in the west Texas social scheme, a position implied in her calling the Porter farm a "dirt farm",⁷ conjuring as the phrase does tenants that are ignorant, gross and unrefined. Katherine Anne Porter is herself thus unmasked. All the moonlight-and-magnolias gentility never existed in Katherine Anne Porter's family life, was pure fantasy. "Old Mortality" is a tissue of lies.

One cannot deny that Katherine Anne Porter in a superficial way misleads her readers in "Old Mortality." The library with the fine editions instantly conjures up a house both large and luxurious, though Katherine Anne Porter, ingenious creator of fictions, provides us with few details of size or descriptions of furnishings. On the other hand, Mr. Porter was not a "dirt farmer" in his background or in his social position, and if he was one literally for some time, we would be quite wrong to assume that that became his social and cultural identity. In the Southern scheme of things even forty years after the Civil War, certain details reflected unerringly a family's social position and status. Everyone was poor, and some never recovered their family fortune after the war. In a very deep sense, you were not what you were; you

were what you — or your family — had been.

That Katherine Anne Porter's grandfather was an early Texas settler and had owned several hundred acres of farmland and would have counted for much, even fifty years after the fact. The apparently insignificant fact, to Mrs. Givner, of the Porters' having been founding members of their church in Indian Creek and of Mr. Porter's having been Sunday school superintendent both indicate to those familiar with Southern social codes a sound social position.

Mrs. Givner wants to turn the "dirt farm" interpretation of the Porter's social and economic position into a means of exalting Katherine Anne Porter herself, and she notes: "Katherine Anne Porter preferred to present herself as heir to strong literary and cultural traditions. Such suggestions are unfortunate, since they obscure what was greatly to her credit — that she developed independently out of the utmost deprivation . . . The distance that Porter travelled from the little house in Indian Creek and the dirt farm in Hays County was great."⁸ Mrs. Givner sees her subject not only from the outside, but from outside Porter's cultural context. In her own mind we can be sure that Katherine Anne Porter's family was, in the spirit, precisely what she tells us in "Old Mortality."⁹ Katherine Anne Porter did not have to look back to her grandfather's hundreds of acres to reassure herself of her family's proper place in society. Both her parents were better educated than was usual at that time, and this, more anything else, must have been a source of pride to Porter.

What is clear is that Katherine Anne Porter did not have a deprived childhood in an ignorant, illiterate family. She did not grow up in great houses with fine libraries, as her Miranda did, but she would, I think, have been startled to hear her background spoken of as one of "utter deprivation." She had a strong sense of coming from an educated family of sound social respectability, even of some social prominence. If we look at the whole

picture, we see that the family was, indeed, despite its apparent material poverty, according to its own place and its own time, refined, cultured, respectable.

"Noon Wine" provides the image of the world that Mrs. Givner would have us take as a true reflection of Katherine Anne Porter's background. The story is set on a small, rather desolate South Texas farm. The characters are a family of what Porter calls "plain people" — uneducated, unrefined, only marginally respectable. Mrs. Givner identifies the farm as the one where Katherine Anne Porter stayed in 1901 or 1902 after her grandmother Porter's death. She identifies the family as the owners of the farm, Katherine Anne Porter's Thompson cousins. (It is particularly odd to suppose that Katherine Anne Porter went to great lengths to hide her personal connection with such people since she actually calls the family in the story Thompson.) To Mrs. Givner the fact that Katherine Anne Porter had such cousins is proof that her own family were "plain people." In the Southern scheme of things, however, families not uncommonly have large systems of cousinage comprehending people of diverse economic and even social backgrounds. Again Mrs. Givner fails to understand the subtleties of Katherine Anne Porter's Southern milieu.

We have a very good source of information about the origins of "Noon Wine" from Katherine Anne Porter herself. She wrote a long essay in which she describes how she came to write the story.¹⁰ It is a remarkable document because it explores the workings of the artistic imagination. She traces images and emotions brought together in the story to the apparently unconnected experiences that produced them. She recalls seeing a man with a ram-rod back and an arrogant tilt to his head: she was told that he was the proudest man in three counties. This man became for Porter the physical embodiment of pride. She tells of hearing a gunshot at the age of two or three and knowing with instinctive terror that it signalled violent death. This

became the suicidal blast of Mr. Thompson's shotgun which ends the story. She recalls the face of a woman whose husband was trying to justify and excuse some crime he had committed. The woman's face, with its weak eyes and smoked spectacles, became for Porter the image of human shame and suffering. She describes the sharp knives and blunt instruments that were so much a part of daily life in the rural South. These disparate images and sensations are the core of the story. They coalesced, were fused together in Porter's imagination, to produce "Noon Wine."

It is not difficult to see how this collection of images and sensations would in the imagination become engrafted onto the bare outlines of the Thompson family: a remote farm, a man, his wife, his sons, their hired man. The final element was added by Porter's recollection of a murder that occurred sometime during her childhood. All of these things came together in Porter's imagination.

Joan Givner's sleuthing has turned up some "facts" that provide us with some insight into what the disparate elements were that provided the surface of "Old Mortality."¹¹ Aunt Amy and her racehorse-owning husband Gabriel were based on Katherine Anne's Aunt Annie Gay and her husband Thomas Gay. Like Amy, Annie had a brief, exciting marriage and died young. Cousin Lady Bruton came to visit the Porters to tell of having heard Paderewski and to provide the image of Cousin Isabel in her tight black riding habit surrounded by beaux. Tante Ione, as was called the wife of Harrison Porter's brother, told Katherine Anne about her girlhood in a New Orleans convent, from which she, like Miranda at the end of "Old Mortality," eloped. Porter's childhood friend Erma Schlemmer remembered that her family had a copy of Dante with terrifying drawings that the child Katherine Anne was fond of looking at. These "facts" underwent the same sort of imaginative transformation and fusion as those Katherine Anne Porter herself describes in her essay on "Noon Wine." And yet, the works produced are in their primary qualities,

reflected in Porter's artistic techniques, immensely different.

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Katherine Anne Porter's old friend, the poet and novelist Robert Penn Warren, has said that "Katherine Anne Porter's fiction remains, perhaps, the best source of biography, in the deepest sense."¹² I do not take this to mean that we find a biographical source of any significance on the surface of the stories but on the deepest level of the themes, the values, and modes of perception revealed in the stories. For biography "in the deepest sense" we must look to the themes of the stories and to the voices in which they are told. Whether the details of "Old Mortality" and "Noon Wine" recreate the world Katherine Anne Porter inhabited is of little importance.

But when one comes to biography "in the deepest sense" one finds oneself on difficult terrain indeed — which is perhaps why a biographer might prefer to keep to the superficial, even though that territory too, as we have seen, is not a landscape without pitfalls. The ways that artists find to convey their themes are manifold and vowed to hidden ways. But without becoming too entangled in these mysteries, we can note that a writer is able to take a theme and present it in startlingly different forms. "Old Mortality" and "Noon Wine" are both about freedom and self-knowledge. But the forms these themes take in the two stories are radically different from one another.¹³

"Old Mortality" is characterized by its use of patterns of imagery, symbolic acts and abstract language.¹⁴ These methods lead and point us as we make our way through the story. We begin with the family with its stories and myths, its romancing, at first not very interesting to the child Miranda, but increasing in power and significance as she grows older.¹⁵ The title, also the title of a historical romance by Sir Walter Scott, points the theme of romanticism. The theme gives the story its primary structure, created by the shifting significance of the motif of horses. The horses are first associated

with beauty, spirit, energy and adventure. Later, when Miranda sees the exhausted racehorse with rivulets of blood coming from its nose, a harsher reality is exposed. The theme is concluded symbolically (and to my mind not quite satisfactorily) with the family's acquisition of a motorcar at the end of the story: the age of horses, of romanticism, is past. This theme is biographically motivated for, as we know, Katherine Anne Porter's family were by nature romantic and romanticizing. She herself inherited the tendency and all her life struggled to reconcile her hard rational side with the yearning of her romantic nature.

The theme of freedom is intimated in the first part of the story in the family legends of the restless, unconventional, high-spirited Aunt Amy. It is developed more explicitly in Miranda's considering herself "immured" at her convent school. In the final section of the story, the theme of freedom is symbolically presented in Miranda's elopement from the convent school and then in the flight from the marriage that has not, after all, liberated her. On the train, Miranda's embittered cousin tries to explain the reality of Amy's character and searches for the phrase with which to pin Amy down: "She rode too hard, and she danced too freely, and she talked too much . . . I don't mean she was loud or vulgar, she wasn't but she was *too free*." ¹⁶ The phrase "too free" is italicized and sets up reverberations in the context of Miranda's own recent actions: she had pursued freedom, from family and school by running away and marrying without her family's consent. In the final paragraphs of the story, which give Miranda's thoughts, romanticism has an almost negligible place. Her real preoccupation is with freedom and self-knowledge: ¹⁷

Miranda felt a vague distaste for seeing cousins. There were too many of them and her blood rebelled against the ties of blood. She was sick to death of cousins. She did not want any more ties with this house, she was going to leave it, and she was not going back to her husband's family

either. She would have no more bonds that smothered her in love and hatred. She knew now why she had run away to marriage, and she knew that she was going to run away from marriage, and she was not going to stay in any place, with anyone, that threatened to forbid her making her own discoveries, that said "No" to her. She hoped no one had taken her old room, she would like to sleep there once more, she would say good-bye there where she had loved sleeping once, loved sleeping and waking and waiting to be grown, to begin to love. Oh, what is life, she asked herself, in desperate seriousness, in those childish unanswerable words, and what shall I do with it? It is something of my own, she thought in a fury of jealous possessiveness, what shall I make of it? She did not know that she asked herself this because all her earliest training had argued that life was a substance, a material to be used, it took shape and direction and meaning only as the possessor guided and worked it; living was a progress of continuous and varied acts of the will directed towards a definite end. She had been assured that there were good and evil ends, one must make a choice. But what was good and what was evil? I hate love, she thought, as if this were the answer, I hate loving and being loved, I hate it. And her disturbed and seething mind received a shock of comfort from this sudden collapse of an old painful structure of distorted images and misconceptions. "You don't know anything about it", said Miranda to herself, with extraordinary clearness as if she were an elder admonishing some younger misguided creature. "You have to find out about it." But nothing in her prompted her to decide, "I will now do this, I will be that, I will go yonder, I will take a certain road to a certain end." There are questions to be asked first, she thought, but who will answer them? No one, or there will be too many answers, none of them right. 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, 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.¹⁸

This marvelous passage is a splendid example of Katherine Anne Porter's famous style. And yet, it seems to me, that Porter herself is here, as at many other points in the story, too self-conscious about her themes, about what she is trying to tell us about herself. I shall return to this point later, but first let us consider how "Noon Wine" differs from "Old Mortality" in its presentation of the themes of freedom and self-knowledge.

"Noon Wine" is as characterized by the absence of patterns of imagery, of symbol and symbolic acts, and of abstract language as "Old Mortality" is by their presence.¹⁹ Katherine Anne Porter is not attempting to tell us anything personal about herself; she is telling us very directly and simply, and with all the ambiguity that belongs to directness and simplicity, how impossible freedom is to achieve and how limited is our self-knowledge. These themes are embodied in the situations of the characters and in the actions prompted by these situations.²⁰

Mr. Thompson is in a sense free when he is leading a shiftless, lazy existence scratching out a living; Mr. Helton brings him prosperity, makes him feel a groundless pride in himself when in fact he has done nothing to merit any sense of accomplishment. But on another level Mr. Thompson's life becomes more complicated, less free and irresponsible. Confronted with the evil Mr. Hatch, he recognizes evil, but that acuteness is adulterated by his pride, by his wish to protect what he receives from Mr. Helton's bounty. He likes Mr. Helton and wants to protect him, but he cannot extricate from his good feelings, the less noble ones that arise from his own selfishness. Threat to himself, to his own way of life, causes him to see what he fears

rather than what actually is. Mr. Hatch is evil, but Mr. Helton is, in fact, a murderer: that is truth, but it is only a part of the truth. Katherine Anne Porter does not belabor this or worry over its moral implications.²¹

Mr. Helton's harmonicas and the knives and axes and the plugs of tobacco of Mr. Thompson and Homer T. Hatch are too complex and too ambiguous to lend themselves to symbolic interpretation. They simply *are*. From these details, we know the men, but we know them incompletely: the mystery of their beings remains intact. However elegantly Katherine Anne Porter manages the horses and Miranda's symbolic immurement and flights in "Old Mortality", we feel, I think, a kind of strain in her determination to make us understand. Such tension is absent from "Noon Wine", not because we are more likely to understand "Noon Wine" any more easily, but because Katherine Anne Porter herself is freer, less self-conscious about her material. We sense this most acutely in the final passage of "Noon Wine," a passage characteristic of the entire story:

Mr. Thompson went through the kitchen. There he lighted the lantern, took a thin pad of scratch paper and a stub of pencil from the shelf where the boys kept their school books. He swung the lantern on his arm and reached into the cupboard where he kept the guns. The shotgun was there to his hand, primed and ready, a man never knows when he may need a shotgun. He went out of the house without looking back when he had left it, passed his barn without seeing it, and struck out to the farthest end of his fields, which ran for half a mile to the east. So many blows had been struck at Mr. Thompson and from so many directions he couldn't stop any more to find out where he was hit. He walked on, over plowed ground and over meadow, going through barbed wire fences cautiously, putting his gun through first; he could almost see in the dark, now his eyes were used to it. Finally he came to the last fence; here he sat down, back against a post, lantern at his side, and with the pad on his knee, moistened the stub pencil and began to write:

"Before Almighty God, the great judge of all before who I am about to

appear, I do hereby solemnly swear that I did not take the life of Mr. Homet T. Hatch on purpose. It was done in defense of Mr. Helton. I did not aim to hit him with the ax but only to keep him off Mr. Helton. He aimed a blow at Mr. Helton who was not looking for it. It was my belief at the time that Mr. Hatch would of taken the life of Mr. Helton if I did not interfere. I have told all this to the judge and the jury and they let me off but nobody believes it. This is the only way I can prove I am not a cold blooded murderer like everybody seems to think. If I had been in Mr. Helton's place he would of done the same for me. I still think I done the only thing there was to do. My wife — ”

Mr. Helton stopped here to think a while. He wet the pencil point with the tip of his tongue and marked out the last two words. He sat a while blacking out the words until he had a neat oblong patch where they had been, and started again :

“It was Mr. Homer T. Hatch who came to do wrong to a harmless man. He caused all this trouble and he deserved to die but I am sorry it was me who had to kill him.”

He licked the point of the pencil again, and signed his full name carefully, folded the paper and put it in his outside pocket. Taking off his right shoe and sock, he set the butt of the 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, the barrel under his chin and fumbled for the trigger with his great toe. That way he could work it. ²²

Joan Givner maintains that “Noon Wine” is Katherine Anne Porter’s masterpiece because in it she is writing about the kind of place and the kind of people she knew best. ²³ That Porter was more familiar with small farms than with large houses and fine libraries and New Orleans convent schools may be indisputable, but to conclude that familiarity means greater clarity of understanding seems to me to be dubious both as a psychological principle and as an aesthetic one. A more subtle evaluation is called for.

The experiences that gave rise to "Old Mortality" were personal in the deepest sense; and those that gave rise to "Noon Wine," as recounted by Katherine Anne Porter herself in "Noon Wine: The Sources," were impersonal in the deepest sense. That is to say, whatever the truth of Katherine Anne Porter's social and economic family background, in "Old Mortality" the emotional, the psychological experience, the enslaving and distorting power of family stories and myths, and the ambiguous and contradictory nature of one's own personal experience, is drawn directly from Katherine Anne Porter's most intimate personal feelings. The story, in short, is very personal indeed. It is *about* Katherine Anne Porter herself in a way that "Noon Wine" very distinctly is not. This division between the personal and the impersonal as sources of material on which Katherine Anne Porter's imagination worked can be found throughout her work.

In the first two stories that Katherine Anne Porter published, "María Concepción" and "Virgin Violeta," we find the same distinction between impersonal and personal experience shaped by the imagination. "María Concepción" explores hard, harsh, violent lives with the same kind of directness as "Noon Wine." We know the disparate experiences that came together for the creation of "Noon Wine" because Katherine Anne Porter herself has told us what they were. Those that went into the making of "María Concepción" are lost to us, but I think that we can recognize that they came from the same place and were worked on in the same way by her imagination as those in "Noon Wine." "María Concepción" is a story about Mexican peasants — brutal and illiterate. Katherine Anne Porter does not observe them dispassionately: she becomes them absolutely. The same is true of the characters in "Noon Wine". The simplicity and directness of the language in both stories, the absence of symbolism or patterns of imagery, all reflect that elemental directness that characterizes the impersonal experience fused by the imagination. ²⁴

On the other hand, although "Virgin Violeta" with its Mexican setting and characters appears to belong to the same mode as "María Concepción", it is quite different. The emerging sexuality, which Violeta finds so fascinating and so repulsive, is drawn from Katherine Anne Porter's personal experience; Violeta is Porter as much as Miranda is in the later stories. It is worth noting, too, that the Mexicans in "Virgin Violeta" are not peasants but affluent bourgeoisie. The house is cool, dark, elegant. Poetry is being read: the all too physical and erotic cousin is a poet; Violeta's sister is stylishly dressed; Violeta is at home on holiday from her convent school. The charge that Porter is trying to deceive us about her family background cannot be made here. The surface is, as I argued with regard to "Old Mortality," a reflection of Katherine Anne Porter's deepest conception of her family's social position. "Virgin Violeta," like "Old Mortality," is about Katherine Anne Porter herself in a way that "Noon Wine" and "Maria Concepcion" are not.

"Virgin Violeta" bears perhaps even more resemblance to another Miranda story — "The Grave." The sickeningly sweet, overripe, erotic smell of the fruit in "Virgin Violeta" is echoed in the smell of the sweets offered to Miranda amidst the rotting refuse of the foreign marketplace at the end of "The Grave." This event calls up Miranda's childhood experience with Proustian clarity and provides the story with an explicitly retrospective vision. Even though there is no such retrospective vision either explicitly or implicitly in "Virgin Violeta," there is none the less a strong sense in the story of the narrator's looking back on some deeply personal experience, recreating, contemplating, trying to make sense of something that she experienced in the past.

If we return to the final passage of "Old Mortality," we find that in the former Katherine Anne Porter avails herself of what became in modernist fiction a particularly autobiographical prerogative. (We can compare this

technique with the ending of Joyce's "Araby.") As she records the thoughts of her fictional self at the age of eighteen, the forty-five year old artist provides a commentary, a judgement, on that earlier self. Katherine Anne Porter had to call into service this technique to enable her to shape and control this highly personal material. But "Noon Wine," being impersonal, Porter has no need for such machinery for controlling and pointing, or commentary for correcting and distancing.

The narrative voice at the end of "Noon Wine" is calmly detached, contrasting sharply with the flourishes, like those of an operatic aria, that characterize the ending of "Old Mortality." That detachment creates for the reader the space in which to feel and judge for himself. In "Old Mortality" the author-narrator herself intervenes in a variety of ways, as we have seen, to tell the reader what to feel and how to judge. The final effect is that the two stories provide the reader with strikingly different reading experiences.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Joan Givner, *The Life of Katherine Anne Porter* (London, 1983).
- 2 Chapters 1-3 of Givner are those particularly pertinent to the discussion in this essay.
- 3 Quoted by Givner, 35.
- 4 See Givner, 35; 40-41.
- 5 See, for instance, Charles Allen, "The Nouvelles of Katherine Anne Porter", *University of Kansas City Review*, XXXIX (Dec 1962) 87-93; Howard Baker, "The Contemporary Short Story", *Southern Review*, III (1938), 595-6; and Mark Schorer, "Afterword" in Katherine Anne Porter, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (New York, 1962), 167-75.
- 6 See Givner, 72-3.
- 7 Givner, 45
- 8 Givner, 44-5.
- 9 See below, my discussion of "Virgin Violeta" as a similar reflection of KAP's

conception of her own background.

- 10 Katherine Anne Porter, "Noon Wine": The Sources" in *The Collected Essays of Katherine Anne Porter* (New York, 1970).
- 11 See Givner, 55-61.
- 12 Robert Penn Warren, ed. *Katherine Anne Porter: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1971) 2.
- 13 See Glenway Wescott, "Katherine Anne Porter Personally" in *Images of Truth: Remembrances and Criticism* (New York, 1962), 25-58. Wescott discusses the experiences he shared with KAP that are reflected in the themes of her stories.
- 14 See John V. Hagopian, "Katherine Anne Porter: Feeling, Form and Truth", *Four Quarters*, XII (Nov 1962), 1-10, for a discussion of the symbolism in "Old Mortality".
- 15 Louis Auchincloss, "Katherine Anne Porter" in *Pioneers and Caretakers: A Study of Nine American Women Novelists* (Minneapolis, MN, 1965), 136-51, examines the theme of the romantic view of the past in the South as used in KAP's stories.
- 16 Katherine Anne Porter, "Old Mortality" in *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter* (New York, 1979), 215. All subsequent quotations from KAP's stories are from this edition.
- 17 See Edward Greenfield Schwartz, "The Fiction of Memory", *Southwest Review*, XLV (Summer 1960), 204-15, for a discussion of the significance of the experiences Miranda undergoes in the course of the story.
- 18 "Old Mortality", 220-1.
- 19 Although it is impossible to offer absence as proof, it seems to be significant that in the body criticism of "Noon Wine," one does not find an analysis of the story in terms of imagery or symbol.
- 20 Frederick J. Hoffman, "Katherine Anne Porter's 'Noon Wine'", *CEA Critic*, XVIII (Nov 1956), 1 and 6-7, examines the story's action and situation and the directness with which KAP explores her themes; in a similar vein, F.O. Matthiessen, "That True and Human World", *Accent*, V (Winter 1945), 121-3, points out that in "Noon Wine", KAP uses violent acts to reveal ethical values.
- 21 Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren and John T. Purser, eds., *An Approach to Literature* (New York, 1952), 218.9, suggest that "Noon Wine" is about "the difficult definition of guilt and innocence".

22 "Noon Wine", 267-8.

23 See Givner, 77.

24 For analyses of KAP's directness and simplicity of language in "Noon Wine", see Janis Stout, "Mr. Hatch's Volubility and Miss Porter's Reserve", *Essays in Literature*, 12 (Fall 1985), 285-93 ; and M. Wynn Thomas, "Strangers in a Strange Land : A Reading of 'Noon Wine'," *American Literature*, 47 (May 1975), 230-46.