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Thomas Austenfeld

## Pigs, Ghosts, and a Ship of Fools

### Katherine Anne Porter's Response to Totalitarian Europe

**K**atherine Anne Porter (1890–1980), Texas native and lifelong peripatetic writer, had a nearly obsessive relationship with totalitarian Europe, rooted both in the facts of her biography and in her political experience. In this essay I attempt to look at the connections between these two roots. The biographical aspects feeding her obsession can be linked to her upbringing in the American South and her lifelong Southern sensibility, especially with respect to the question of race, which has remained the single, overwhelming fact of Southern history from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Movement to the present day. The political roots of her obsession are focused on her experiences in Berlin in the winter of 1931 but extend backwards to her time in Mexico in the 1920s and encompass her critical, even pessimistic view of human character, which stands in noticeable contrast to the generally meliorist view of human character that characterizes the dominant myth of American self-consciousness and American self-confidence. While Porter specifically refers to persons of German ancestry in some of her Texas-based stories and while I make intermittent reference to her single novel *Ship of Fools* (published 1962) as I set up my argument, I will give most of my attention in this essay to her novella-length story “The Leaning Tower” (published 1940) which she set in the Berlin of 1932.

*Ship of Fools*, begun as a serial letter to Porter's friend Caroline Gordon while travelling to Europe on the steamship *Werra*, is about a group of ship's passengers bound together in a restricted space and bound for an uncertain destination, a *donnée* that became a lifelong writer's trauma for Porter. In fits and starts, she would return to this text throughout the 1940s and 1950s, struggling with writer's block for the better part of thirty years, finally delivering her *magnum opus* to great, but quickly vanishing, critical applause. Begun at a time when the Nazi movement was gaining strength and published at a time when Germany was in the middle of retrospective soul-searching and

self-definition, this novel should be seen as an exemplary document of a modernist American writer's engagement with totalitarianism. In taking advantage of looking at Germany's fifteen years under totalitarian rule from both historical ends, first in anticipation and then in retrospect, *Ship of Fools* confused the genre expectations of its audience inasmuch as Modernism had ended by the time the novel was published. Darlene Unrue, *doyenne* of Porter critics, has commented:

Wayne Booth asked whether one could even call it a novel, and scholars and critics struggled to place it in a class. Some wanted to call it a beast fable because of Porter's heavy use of animal imagery, but those who identified its satiric elements were closest to the mark, for Porter's aim, from the early 1930s on, had been to write a satire in the spirit of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly*, and Sebastian Brant's fifteenth-century moral allegory, *Stultifera Navis*, which she acknowledged as her inspiration and the source of her own title. Had the novel been published in the late 1920s or 1930s, closer to the time of its conception, it is likely that it would have been understood for what it was: a high modernist novel that reflects a re-writing of *The Odyssey*, as well as those old satires, in an atmosphere of twentieth-century angst; that incorporates selected Freudian theories about dreams and evil; and that, with the advantage of historical hindsight, analyzes the sources of the totalitarianism that nearly brought about the collapse of modern civilization.<sup>1</sup>

Its literary and philosophical shortcomings notwithstanding, *Ship of Fools* is unique in its ability to shed light on the discussion of the relationship between authority and modernity, the topic of this issue of *Colloquium Helveticum*. Yet within the parameters of a comparative literature approach, both the novel and Porter's story "The Leaning Tower" also reveal Porter's uneasy engagement with the political history of the American South and with the troubled history of American literature in general in relation to political authority.

Porter was a Southern writer above all. The cultural distinctions of her region of origin, the American South, merit some initial elucidation as they have direct influence on Porter's political views and on her unease in contemplating authority and authoritarianism. In view of the largely French and German acculturation of most of this periodical's readers, I have taken a historical approach instead of a purely literary one for the purposes of this essay.

1 Darlene Harbour Unrue, "Ship of Fools," *The Literary Encyclopedia*, [<http://www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=2087>], accessed 14 January 2011.

I will first approach the topic specifically from the point of view of a practitioner of American literature. In a second step, I will discuss a small excerpt from a sample text by Porter which raises questions about the relationship between modernity and authority with particular urgency. Large conceptual questions are at stake. As comparatists, we know with Wittgenstein that the limits of our language are the limits of our world (*Tractatus* 5.6).<sup>2</sup> Thus in German “Autoritäre Moderne” suggests an abstract entity, the modern (or “modernity”) qualified by an adjective rendered either as “authoritative” or, better, as “authoritarian.” The French title “modernité et autorité” elegantly sidesteps the issue. But what are we to make of this in English? How are we to render the complex relationship between self-authorizing creators of literary texts and the limited authority that texts may exert in a pluralist universe?

Ever since the Renaissance and the rise of Humanism – that is, the Modern Era in the large sense – human beings have assumed that authority resides not in the heavens but in the mind. Sebastian Brant’s moral allegory *Das Narrenschiff* (1494), Porter’s ideational model for *Ship of Fools*, appeared at the dawn of the Renaissance and, in its didactic attempt to reform the follies of the age, presents a key document whose theologically trained author seeks to amend human behaviour through eternal verities. Over the course of the succeeding centuries, the author as creator of worlds of fiction attained a privileged position as interpreter and authoritarian, culminating in various episodes of genius worship arising in both the eighteenth century and in the *fin-de-siècle* decadence movements. Yet with World War I and the passing of the old certainties, with T.S. Eliot’s diagnosis of a now merely fragmentary universe, with Willa Cather’s observation that the world “broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts”, and finally with the death of the author declared by Roland Barthes in 1968, authority no longer resided in fiction.<sup>3</sup>

2 Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Tractatus logico-philosophicus”, *Werkausgabe in 8 Bänden*, Frankfurt/M., Suhrkamp, 1984, Bd. 1, 67. Translation mine.

3 See T. S. Eliot, “these fragments I have shored against my ruins,” Section V of “The Waste Land” (1922), in *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950*, San Diego, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971, p. 46; Willa Cather, *Not Under Forty* (1922), Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1988, p. V; Roland Barthes, “La mort de l’auteur” (1968), translated as “The Death of the Author”, in Roland

But if literary authority came under attack around World War I and disappeared in the sixties, where did it go? *Natura abhorret vacuum*. It was overshadowed and partially absorbed, I think, by the monstrous manner in which authority and authoritarianism throughout the twentieth century took over the province of politics. Except for the Thirty Years' War of the seventeenth century, we know of no historical period since the Great Migrations that equals the twentieth century in the sheer exercise of brutal force, destruction, and the loss of countless lives – all in the name of authority. While the Shoah stands as the single, incomparable event of the madness of fascism and perverted ideology, the losses of the two World Wars, the various totalitarianisms of Italy, Spain, Germany, China, Cambodia, Chile, Argentina, and North Korea over the course of the century – to name just a few – just as characteristically belong to the age of twentieth-century totalitarianism. To me, therefore, the relationship between our two terms “authority” and “modernity” – and I am using them both nominally for the moment to avoid committing to which modifies which – raises the larger question of the relationship between literature and politics. In the realm of authoritarian politics, literature is easily instrumentalized for political purposes which, in turn, raises the question of the ethical responsibility of the author. The modern period, then, seems to ask with unprecedented urgency which belief, which ideology, which creed will finally guide the author of a literary text who wishes to reach a reader. Authorial autonomy and authoritarian rule are always at war with each other. One could surely write a comparative literary history of the twentieth century as the literary history of authorial ethics of all stripes. Ernst Jünger and T. S. Eliot would figure in this literary history as much as Thomas Mann or Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Brecht or Beckett, Faulkner or Baldwin.

United States literature has had a symbiotic and partially troubled relationship with history, politics, and authority since the days of the Pilgrims and the Puritans. Because so many early American texts are situated in the contexts of mission, land claim, and religious doctrine, an ethical appeal is frequently their main reason for being. American literature allowed itself to be instrumentalized and enlisted in the ser-

vice of justifying the “city upon a hill” of the Puritan covenant, the “manifest destiny” of westward expansion, the ostensible Biblical grounding of the rightness of slavery prior to 1865, and the extolling of America’s providential role in leading the so-called “free world.” Yet American literature has also come down to us in the form of protest against instrumentalization and has strenuously argued for the ethical responsibility of the individual against the state, for example in the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Robinson Jeffers, John Steinbeck, Allen Ginsberg, Robert Lowell, and Toni Morrison.

The interwar decades of the twentieth century, the twenties and thirties, gave us a certain narrative about American modernism, but more and different narratives are needed. American victories in World War I and World War II do not sufficiently explain the relationship of a modern industrial state to questions of democracy and authority. It is simply not enough to talk about the Jazz Age followed by the Depression Era, or the Lost Generation followed by the G.I. Generation.<sup>4</sup> If we look instead at the effects of political authority on literary practice, we will quickly recognize the political education that the lost generation – probably the most influential American writers of modernism – experienced in an increasingly totalitarian Europe.

When I first wrote about American women writers and the Nazis in 2001, I focused on the differences between two groups of expatriate Americans.<sup>5</sup> I wanted to show the contrast between the “lost generation” in Paris in the 1920s with which we are all familiar – mostly male writers like Hemingway and Fitzgerald who advocated a kind of post-World War I hedonism – and the then largely unknown women writers who experienced a political apprenticeship in Germany and Austria in the 1930s, among them Katherine Anne Porter. As a result of their European experiences, these women became, to varying degrees, committed progressive activists in a 1950s America marked by anti-communist fear and suspicions of subversion. Poet Robert Lowell called this decade the “tranquillized *Fifties*” in a reference both to

4 Compare Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Generations: The History of America’s Future, 1584 to 2069*, New York, Harper Perennial, 1992.

5 Thomas Austenfeld, *American Women Writers and the Nazis: Ethics and Politics in Boyle, Porter, Stafford, and Hellman*, Charlottesville and London, University Press of Virginia, 2001.

the domestic policies of the Eisenhower administration and the wide availability of Valium, often consumed with three martinis.<sup>6</sup> Only writers remained to raise the general consciousness.

We now recognize that Southern writers' authority may be undermined by the very setting which shaped these writers. We know that a moment in history may determine the shape of an aesthetic career: Marinetti and the Italian Futurists based their aesthetics and ethics on the anticipated mastery of nature by the machine; T.S. Eliot found his standards in a conservative branch of the Anglican Church; Kay Boyle and her Dadaist friends in the Paris of the mid-twenties staged a "revolution of the Word" in radically questioning all rules of spoken discourse. By the time the thirties came around, "authority" had definitively spread to the political realm, and it would lead to an existential crisis in – of all places – the American South.

With the exception of images from hurricane Katrina in 2005, the South is familiar to many only from images of the American Civil War as mediated through such sentimental texts as Margaret Mitchell's 1936 *Gone with the Wind*, which in turn was secondarily mediated through David Selznick's 1939 film starring Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh. Yet even if our knowledge of the South were limited to just this book and this movie, and if we had never read William Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston, Thomas Wolfe, Robert Penn Warren, Tennessee Williams, Richard Wright, Katherine Anne Porter, or Lillian Smith, we would have gathered – correctly, it turns out – that the Civil War is the defining historical event of the South, and that the history of slavery, race relations, agrarianism, poverty, conservatism, religiosity, irrationalism, and climatic as well as emotional steaminess were and are ingredients of Southern life. In such a place, stories fall on fertile ground, some narratives achieve the status of unshakeable foundational myths, and life may end up imitating art as often as art will serve as mimesis of life.

In the American South, set apart by history, tradition, sociology, and a long-lasting system of race and caste distinction, the shadow of fascism during the thirties created a crisis. In the former Confederate States, the Secessionists had begun in 1861, and subsequently lost in 1865, the American Civil War which they had fought as much over

6 Robert Lowell, "Memories of West Street and Lepke," *Life Studies and For the Union Dead*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964, p. 85.

the institution of chattel slavery as over the defense of a pre-industrial agrarian philosophy of life that was in many ways a self-serving rendering of British history. It is not uncommon to this day in the South to refer to the Civil War as the “War between the States,” or, in particularly unreconstructed circles, “The War of Northern Aggression.” Following the end of the Northern occupation of the South known as “Reconstruction,” Southern states enacted discriminatory race laws that became known as “Jim Crow,” after a character in a minstrel show. A romantic fiction of antebellum plantation times became a publicly sanctioned myth for white Southerners.

Fifty years after Reconstruction ended, Southern literature, always a strong undercurrent, began to garner national attention. It flourished throughout the entire twentieth century, but in the time of High Modernism it was particularly strong. Jean Toomer’s *Cane* appeared only a few months after T. S. Eliot’s epoch-making *The Waste Land*. The Southern Literary Renaissance peaked with William Faulkner’s winning of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1949. From 1950 to the present day, Southern literature has continued to establish itself and is now a kind of self-perpetuating literary industry. But while the rest of the United States recovered economically after the Depression, the South remained poor and became poorer, relatively speaking, right up until the 1970s.

In the South’s imagined history, white men owned property and were gentlemen farmers. In imitation of Thomas Jefferson, the reluctant statesman who deplored having to leave his beloved Monticello every time his country called him to service in Washington or abroad, these white property-owners saw themselves as the last specimens of that mythic figure, the American yeoman farmer. Their political history was built on the experience of defeat and shame. If they were poor, they were proudly poor. They resisted industrialization, finance capitalism, technical advancement. They preserved a post-slavery form of slavery by disenfranchising blacks politically and keeping them in economic bondage. The history of the United States advanced without them when, in 1865, the clocks in the South stopped on the day of Robert E. Lee’s surrender at Appomattox. The South would now have no appreciable political influence for a century.<sup>7</sup>

7 Roughly one hundred years after the South’s surrender, Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas was sworn in as President according to Constitutional mandate after John

At the height of the modernist movement, in 1930, a group of Southern writers and intellectuals connected through Vanderbilt University in Tennessee published a manifesto entitled *I'll Take My Stand*, in which they excoriated mainstream America for being on the wrong track and advocated a return to agrarian, Jeffersonian, essentially feudal values. The title is taken from the South's unofficial national anthem, the song "Dixie," which contains the line, "in Dixieland I'll take my stand to live and die in Dixie." The song originates in the practice of blackface minstrelsy, a politically highly incorrect folksy entertainment show in which white men blackened their faces and sang and danced songs like "Dixie" about the supposed homesickness of former slaves for their old plantation. The sentiment and the performance exemplify revisionist history and the assertion of white Southern conservative values. At least some of the writers of *I'll Take My Stand* interpreted the Declaration of Independence with its ringing endorsement of the equality of all men in the same manner in which its author Thomas Jefferson possibly had understood it: all white, literate, property-owning men are created equal.

Yet while the South was thus perceived politically as looking backward and inward, the Southern Renaissance quickly produced literary texts which demonstrated that Southerners, in spite of their history, were well aware of the political situation of the rest of the world: the totalitarian regimes of Europe – above all Germany, Italy, and Spain, but in a different manner also the Soviet Union – were creating conditions which, through the ruthless application of race, exclusion, dehumanization, and the hypertrophy of a mythical past, made the South's similar structure and outlook painfully apparent. In a word, the South looked around and became aware of its own latent and overt totalitarian features. In *All the King's Men*, Robert Penn Warren (one of the contributors to *I'll Take My Stand*) would later portray Louisiana governor Huey Long as populist demagogue in the mould of Adolf Hitler. By the 1940s, segregated black neighbour-

F. Kennedy's assassination. He thus ascended to the Presidency instead of being directly elected. He won regular election in 1964 and subsequently lost to Nixon in 1968. No Southerner would be directly elected President of the United States until 1976, when Jimmy Carter of Georgia rode to office on the wave of protest and disgust over Vietnam, Watergate, Nixon, and Ford's presidential pardon of his predecessor.

hoods all over the South increasingly may have reminded those who had been to Europe of concentration camps.

White Southern writers wrote about the quasi-totalitarian parts of Southern life in a covert manner, while black Southern writers were more outspoken. Black writers in particular were thus quick to see the irony in America's involvement with Britain in World War II. Why should black American GIs offer to help defend a nation with a long history of imperialism and the subjugation of dark-skinned peoples in all four corners of the world? The U. S. Army during the early years of World War II was still strictly segregated; even the Red Cross blood supply was separated by race.<sup>8</sup> Why should these soldiers liberate suppressed peoples only to return to fascism right back home? The so-called "Double-V" movement (Victory abroad and at home) channelled the energies of black American servicemen.

The insidious presence of totalitarian practices in the sociological makeup of the American South was thus not limited only to the history of racism but had direct repercussions on the American war effort in Europe. Southern scholar Robert H. Brinkmeyer has recently called this phenomenon the "fourth ghost" of the South. Starting in the 1930s, precisely as the Agrarians published *I'll Take My Stand*, their nostalgic references to the preservation of European values backfired, because their critics were able to link them to the "wrong" Europeans – i.e., the Nazis.<sup>9</sup> Brinkmeyer suggests that the South remained haunted, not just by the unacknowledged injustices of miscegenation, but more particularly by a growing awareness of continuing precisely the kind of racial segregation that Americans ostensibly opposed in Hitler's Germany. Readers of Southern literature are amply familiar with the first three ghosts: in *Killers of the Dream* (1949), Lillian Smith identifies these as "the black woman with whom the white man ... had sex [but whom he could not acknowledge]; the rejected child resulting from mixed-race coupling; and the black mammy whom the southern child first loves and then must reject as unworthy of love."<sup>10</sup> Lillian Smith names these three ghosts the "manifestations

8 Stanley Sandler (ed.), *World War II in the Pacific: An Encyclopedia*, New York, Garland, 2001, p. 414.

9 Robert H. Brinkmeyer, *The Fourth Ghost: White Southern Writers and European Fascism, 1930–1950*, Louisiana State University Press, 2009, p. 25

10 Brinkmeyer, *op. cit.*, p. 1

of the transgressive desires” that constantly threaten to unravel the rigid social strictures of the region. The fourth ghost then, according to Brinkmeyer, is the unacknowledged but clearly felt presence of totalitarian racial practices that give the lie to America’s declarations of freedom and equality.

By contrast, two brief illustrations from the work of poet Langston Hughes will illustrate the manner in which black Southern writers led the way in openly connecting European totalitarianism with conditions for blacks in the South. Hughes entitled a poem of two stanzas as follows: “Note to All Nazis Fascists and Klansmen.”<sup>11</sup> The title is perhaps more arresting than the poem itself. As Steven Axelrod has observed, “Hughes constructs [the war] as inward in a political sense. In his representation, Nazis and Klansmen are not separated by so much as a comma.”<sup>12</sup> In his 1943 poem, “How About it, Dixie,” Hughes wonders whether President Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms” announced in January 1941 will benefit the poem’s speaker as well. In stanzas 3 and 4, he illustrates the need for liberation of dark-skinned peoples the world over:

Show me that you mean  
Democracy, please –  
Cause from Bombay to Georgia  
I’m beat to my knees.

You can’t lock up Gandhi,  
Club Roland Hayes,  
Then make fine speeches  
About Freedom’s ways

Bombay and Georgia come to life in the figures of Gandhi, who was arrested in August 1942 and imprisoned for two years, and Roland Hayes, the first African-American tenor of worldwide renown, who was beaten by police in Rome, Georgia, after sitting down in the

11 Langston Hughes, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel, New York, Knopf, 1995, p. 291.

12 Steven Gould Axelrod, “Counter-Memory in American Poetry; 1941-2005,” in *Stories of World War II*, ed. Diederik Oostdijk and Markha Valenta, Amsterdam, Vrije Universiteit Press, 2006, p. 6.

whites-only section of a shoe store in July, 1942.<sup>13</sup> Hughes goes on to say,

Looks like by now  
Folks ought to know  
It's hard to beat Hitler  
Protecting Jim Crow.

Freedom's not just  
To be won Over There.  
It means Freedom at home, too –  
Now – *right here.*

Yet as they witness the totalitarian regimes of Europe, more specifically the fascist empires of Mussolini, Hitler, and later Franco, white Southerners *also* had to ask themselves where their sympathies lay, and from this set of circumstances arose the concern with ethics that largely dominates the work of Katherine Anne Porter.

Porter arrived in Berlin in the winter of 1931–32. She observed the increasing presence of Nazi party members and sympathizers in the streets, she went out on a date with Hermann Göring (as incredible as this may sound), and she wrote a novella entitled “The Leaning Tower” to emblemize the fate of Germany.<sup>14</sup> Starting with the recollections of her ocean crossing in 1931, Porter eventually produced a single novel, *Ship of Fools*, in 1962, using it to excoriate Germans for their supposed lack of democratic instinct and personal courage. Through all of her work associated with Germans and Germany, Porter uneasily embodied and reflected the deep irony of Southern social arrangements as well as political and literary thought.

Since considerations of space prevent me from offering a full-scale close reading of “The Leaning Tower,” I would like to direct readers to those moments in the text that grow out of autobiography but evoke the larger fate of the South in wartime confrontation with totalitarian Germany. Porter’s childhood experience with German

13 Joanne M. Owens, “Roland Hayes (1887–1977),” *The New Georgia Encyclopedia*, [<http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-1671>], accessed January 20, 2011.

14 For the facts of Porter’s life, consult Darlene Harbor Unrue, *Katherine Anne Porter: The Life of an Artist*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2005. For the events in Berlin, consult Thomas Austenfeld, *op. cit.*, ch. 3.

Lutheran and Baptist émigrés in Kyle, Texas, predisposed her to sympathy for things German. Porter's best friend in childhood was Erna Schlemmer, the daughter of a well-to-do local merchant who had risen to some level of economic prominence while still a first-generation immigrant. Erna and her family made regular visits back home to Germany and wrote postcards back to Texas. Fictional Charles Upton's friend Kuno is easily recognized as indebted to real-life Erna, and this makes Charles the embodiment of Porter herself, a writer, not a portrait artist, who spoke almost no German and was quite lost, alone in Berlin. The setting of "The Leaning Tower" in Berlin disguises the story as a tale of expatriate disorientation, but it is in addition the story of a Southerner (a Texan, in this case) who, by understanding proto-Nazi Berlin through his Texas frame of reference, will also understand certain aspects of Texas through his newly acquired Berlin frame of reference. Except for the scene of pig-worshipping which I'll discuss below, most of the opening episode of the text deals with Charles's memory of his childhood friend Kuno and thus frames the entire text with a Texas memory. What Charles experiences in Berlin as distinctions of class reverberate in Texas as differences in wealth. Of the ethnic groups that populated his native town, everyone went back "home" once in a while, with the exception of his own group, the Kentuckians who now are now poor farmers.

Charles Upton, with an English-sounding name that links him to the impoverished Kentuckians who never go home because they can't afford to and because they are stuck on the farm, keenly feels the social and class difference between Kuno and himself: a difference marked not by nobility, but by wealth, which is its American equivalent. "Though Kuno's mother was said to be a Baroness in Germany, in Texas she was the wife of a prosperous merchant, a furniture dealer." Charles's family makes its living, "such at it was, from a blackland farm"; that is, from farmland worked by black farmers. As a result, Charles is "used to seeing his father on horseback, or standing about the barns with the Negroes, looking at the animals."<sup>15</sup> These negroes don't work for him, they work with him. In the 1950s,

15 All three quotations in this paragraph are from "The Leaning Tower," in *Katherine Anne Porter. Collected Stories and Other Writings*, New York, The Library of America, 2008, p. 452.

Porter would herself claim descent from a Kentucky clan of plantation owners – alas, it was largely invented. In social terms, the Upton family represent precisely the proud but poor Southern yeomen that the Agrarians extolled in *I'll Take My Stand*.

There are no black people in Berlin in this story, but there are streetwalkers, war invalids, poor people, racial debates, and the shadow of war especially in the latter part of the text (at a New Year's Eve party, the Germans and the Poles trade insults that presage a more serious conflict). For Southerners, this coming war always spells the possibility of renewed interracial warfare in the United States. A Texan reading this story with the opening Texas episode in mind would likely make the connection between Germany's and his homeland's racial practices. In the guise of fiction, Porter thus writes and rewrites history: Porter sets the story in the week between Christmas and New Year's of 1931, and she affixed "Berlin 1931" under it when it was first published in the *Southern Review* in 1941. The decade between 1931 and 1941 marks a dramatic change in the political situation of the United States and its sentiments vis-à-vis Germany. There had been skirmishes in the North Atlantic between German and American vessels. After the German invasion of significant portions of the European mainland, and after the battle over Egypt and Libya, it is not difficult to see the food in this text; i.e., the pigs in the shop window discussed below, standing as synecdoche for Germany's desire to absorb "Lebensraum" and to ingest space. By 1941, the political climate in the United States was quite receptive to German-bashing. By year's end, in mid-December 1941, the United States would be formally at war with Japan and with Germany.

Yet in writing about Germany, Porter writes uneasily about the United States. Like almost all Southern writers, she too is haunted by what Brinkmeyer has termed the fourth ghost. Charles Upton's Texas friend "Kuno Hillentafel," while perhaps not as inscrutable as T. S. Eliot's "familiar compound ghost" in "Little Gidding," is most likely compounded of a series of biographical and cultural parts. Kuno is not just a male stand-in for Porter's beloved childhood friend Erna Schlemmer, he is also fashioned after a relative of Porter's whom she detested: her brother-in-law Julius Hillendahl, commonly called Kuno. Katherine Anne and much of her family despised the husband of her younger sister, "Baby." Porter had deep-seated feelings of envy toward her younger sister and ridiculed her in other

places in her literary *oeuvre*. By making a small change to the name and thus creating the amalgamated “Kuno Hillentafel,” she was able to have Charles Upton project some of his confusion and unfocused resentment against Kuno without implicating her own childhood friend Erna.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to the biographical background, I would suggest, “Kuno Hillentafel” can be read as a complex literary creation. Porter may well have seen potential in fashioning a name in imitation of names like Thomas Mann’s *Tonio Kröger* to suggest two parts of the character’s identity: Kuno is deeply German, connected to Konrad. But Hillentafel may have suggested to her, in addition, a Jewish background. Given widespread anti-Semitism in Texas and other parts of the South in the early part of the twentieth century,<sup>17</sup> Porter was able to send an additional barb in the direction of the Hillendahl family. If they were anti-Semitic, then suggesting a Jewish background for them would have been particularly malicious. This could help explain an obscure and hitherto nearly incomprehensible passage in which Porter has Upton recall an argument the two boys had over social standing and home country:

“There is a big war there, and they wanted to keep my mama and my papa and all of us there, but we had to come back.” Kuno then began to explain in a mystified way how they almost hadn’t got back; they had almost got locked up in a prison somewhere ... “It was because my mother is a Baroness,” Kuno said. “That’s why we got away.”<sup>18</sup>

Behind this child’s story, we might see a prosperous Jewish merchant family with connections to the nobility through Kuno’s mother who, by the skin of their teeth, escaped the concentration camp. This imag-

16 I am deeply grateful to Darlene Unrue, Porter’s biographer, for sharing these important details with me. Personal email correspondence, January 14, 2011.

17 The 1920s saw a dramatic rise in membership of the Ku Klux Klan in Southern states. From 1920 to 1922, industrial magnate Henry Ford published four volumes under the title *The International Jew*, which exerted enormous influence. Porter’s Hillendahl relatives lived in Houston. Antisemitism in the 1920s in the town of Shreveport, in the neighbouring state of Louisiana, has been well documented: see Beverly S. Williams, “Anti-Semitism and Shreveport, Louisiana: The Situation in the 1920s,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, 21.4 (1980): 387–398.

18 Katherine Anne Porter, *op. cit.*, p. 453.

ined, secondary plot does not work historically for the moment that is evoked intradiegetically in “The Leaning Tower” (i.e., sometime after World War I), but it does work for the moment of the story’s publication in 1941. Porter may have wanted to credit herself with prescience in backdating the story to 1931, but she also shrewdly took advantage of the historical moment of 1941 to create a fictional scenario in which hints of a Jewish identity are set side-by-side with black farmers who work in egalitarian fashion together with white farmers.

Given the close connections with things German in Porter’s childhood, it becomes clear why Porter’s writing about Germany is informed by a curious mixture of her direct impressions of Berlin and a transfer of images going back to her Texas childhood. The ghosts of childhood always reappear in Porter’s fiction, but here they become a literary progeny. Thus, while Erna Schlemmer’s name is completely coincidental, there is a certain irony in the fact that the German word *Schlemmer* designates a hearty eater and the verb *schlemmen* has a connotation of overindulgence in food. Many foreign writers routinely ascribe gluttony to Germans, but Porter does so with gusto, especially in the pig-worshipping scene in “The Leaning Tower”:

In one window there were sausages, hams, bacon, small pink chops; all pig, real pig, fresh, smoked, salted, baked, roasted, pickled, spiced, and jellied. In the other were dainty artificial pigs, almond paste pigs, pink sugar chops, chocolate sausages, tiny hams and bacons of melting cream streaked and colored to the very life. Among the tinsel and lace paper, at the back were still other kinds of pigs: plush pigs, black velvet pigs, spotted cotton pigs, metal and wooden mechanical pigs, all with frolicsome curled tails and appealing infant faces.

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.<sup>19</sup>

The Berlin citizens caricatured here are cast in the mould of medieval peasants, to be read by the contemporary reader as willing yet unthinking storm troopers who ingest whatever their *Führer* tells them

19 *Ibid.*, p. 457sq.

to conquer. In this satire, they are transformed into waddling citizens, with their famously ferocious German shepherds mutated into sweater-clad lap-dogs. Associating German gluttony with the consumption of pigs – whether meat or chocolate – is the final insult directed against these anti-Semites who relish precisely the food Jews consider unclean. In a single image, Porter critiques the two most insidious manifestations of the Nazi regime – its expansionist drive and its all-consuming anti-Semitism – while transporting these insights historically backwards by a decade.

But where, finally, does “authority” reside in this modernist text? For Porter, authority and thus ethics remained firmly anchored in the writer herself. The observing eye in the story is that of Charles Upton, a young painter and caricaturist, who in turn is a creation of Katherine Anne Porter. Caricaturing Germans became a habit for her that would not end. When she finally published her novel *Ship of Fools* in 1962, thirty years after having started it, the genre of satire and the mode of caricature dominated the text. Porter’s sister “Baby” will reappear as a fat bulldog named “Bébé” and the Swiss Renaissance engraver and printmaker Urs Graf will reappear in the ship’s ultra-religious passenger “Herr Graf.” Porter’s late satire was still haunted by the ghosts of her cold winter in Berlin in 1931, by her encounter with Sebastian Brant’s 1494 *Narrenschiff*, which she discovered when she lived in Basel in the spring and summer of 1932, and – not least – by the ghosts of the South. The South’s fabled past and its history of institutionalized racism that cast a pall over all human relationships was existentially challenged by its encounter with totalitarian Europe, and Southern writers (including Texans) were deeply affected. It would take another Texan, Lyndon B. Johnson, to finally pass the Civil Rights Act in 1964 that ended Jim Crow.

## Abstract

Die Texanerin Katherine Anne Porter (1890–1980) kann exemplarisch für Autoren des amerikanischen Südens stehen, denen in den dreissiger Jahren die schicksalhafte Vergleichbarkeit der fortwährenden Rassentrennung in ihrer Heimat mit den menschenverachtenden Praktiken der totalitären Regime Europas bewusst wurde. In ihrer Schlüsselerzählung “The Leaning Tower” (1940) karikiert Porter bornierte Berliner Konsumenten von Schweinefleisch, um satirisch das Expansionsbestreben der Nazis zu kritisieren. Gleichzeitig erkennt sie damit die fortwährende Unmenschlichkeit der rassentrennenden Praxis des Südens, ohne sie allerdings offen anzuerkennen. Die sinnstiftende Autorität der modernen Schriftstellerin wird angesichts der übermächtigen politischen Autorität in Zweifel gezogen. Selbst 1962, in ihrem einzigen Roman *Ship of Fools*, konnte Porter keine endgültig zufriedenstellende Auseinandersetzung mit den vom Totalitarismus aufgeworfenen Fragen vorlegen.

