The Trace of History in Katherine Anne Porter’s Ship of Fools

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ABSTRACT

For novels to be considered as history, as material for historians, Tate and his colleagues say that the prerequisite is an author's familiarity with the cultural structure and beliefs of a given society at a given moment. It is the author's ability not only to recapture the past, but also to absorb and reflect it. It is the ability to journey back and forth in time, indicating that the past is never really dead. To quote Porter (1973:449), of the three dimensions of time, only the past is "real" in the absolute sense that it has occurred, the future is only a concept, and the present is that fateful split second in which all action takes place. Against this background I analyze Ship of Fools and claim that it belongs to the "novels as history" category of fiction. Porter, a Southerner like Tate, had an inborn sense of the past, an innate ability to write "novels as history." And Ship of Fools is simultaneously autobiographical, reminiscent and documentary.

KEYWORDS: Porter’s Ship of Fools, novel, History, Time, Journey.

INTRODUCTION

Katherine Anne Porter. What does the name mean to us? It immediately brings to mind a few of her well-known short stories and her only novel Ship of Fools. Despite the brevity of her output as a writer, she won the National Book Award, the Pulitzer Prize and she was on the short list for the Nobel Prize. Why? One of the main reasons, I feel, is her ability to make her fiction a true-to-life one, fiction which her readers can identify with. What does the phrase "The Novel As History" mean? This phrase is borrowed from Allen Tate, who distinguished between "historical novels" and "novel as history" (Aaron 1973:302). According to Tate and his friends, Margaret Mitchell's Gone with the Wind belongs to the former category. In spite of her story-telling ability and her library research, her novel lacks a sense of the past. The novel as history refers to the historical consciousness of a writer. Such historical consciousness was peculiar to Southern writers of the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, and Porter was no exception. Allen Tate elaborates on this consciousness by specifying that it is a consciousness of the past in the present. Throughout Porter's fiction, continuous references to the past emphasize the historical interrelatedness of time as well as the significance of the present. This fascination for the past is a part of history.

Three kinds of fiction are useful to the historian:

(1) autobiographical fiction in which characters and events are based on real people and happenings;
(2) reminiscent fiction in which characters are mostly imaginary, but the settings are well-known to the author through his or her own experience; and
(3) documentary fiction in which the settings, though removed from the author's immediate experience, gain authenticity from the author's search for facts.

Ship of Fools is a story set in a ship on a voyage, with seven nationalities aboard. As in most of her short stories, the action time of the voyage is specified— from 22 August 1931 to 17 September 1931. The journey is from Veracruz, Mexico, to Bremerhaven, Germany. And these facts rule out any speculation with regard to the realism of the setting and the story. Porter herself undertook a similar journey in the same year, 1931—she travelled aboard the ship Werra whereas the ship of fools is called Vera. On her journey, Porter wrote daily notes about the people and events aboard the ship. These she used in a long twenty-page typed letter to her friend Caroline Gordon. And most of these people, along with the events that took place, appear in Ship of Fools. Aboard the Werra, there were 876 passengers in steerage, exactly as they appear in the novel. Also aboard the Werra was a hunchback, Herr Glocken in fiction; a dying man who coughed all day, Herr Graff in the novel; a Spanish countess who became La Condesa of Ship of Fools; the Ship's doctor who had a weak heart became Dr. Schumann in the narrative; and a zarzuela group was given the definite identity of Spanish in the story.

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In an interview with a reporter from the Baltimore Sun on 5 May 1975, Porter said that there was not a soul in the book who was not actually on the passenger list of the Werra. But, there are three women who find no mention in Porter's letter to Gordon -Frau Rittersdorf, Mary Treadwell and Jenny Brown. These three women may be identified with Porter herself. In their characterization, Porter incorporates her own point of view like Porter, Frau Rittersdorf jots down her thoughts in her notebook. She also makes use of her notes in a letter to her dearest friend, Sophia Bismarck. In Tenerife, scenes of poverty make Frau Rittersdorf remember her poverty-stricken past with horror. She portrays Porter's own feelings of panic when made to look at her own past -an impoverished past which she continually disguised and finally made into an aristocratic one.

Mary Treadwell and Jenny Brown have a lot in common, characteristics which they also share with Katherine Anne. Their love for Paris; their love of music and dancing; the affection they feel for their childhood homes, even while seeming to reject these very bonds; their decisions to be independent of any man, a necessity -they believe -if they are to preserve their personal psyche; all these feelings and emotions are common to these three pretty American women. Mary Treadwell, forty-five, lonely and divorced, seems to be a projection of what Jenny may become and what Porter has been at that age.

But, Jenny is the one character who has the most in common with what Katherine Anne felt and experienced during her own voyage on the Werra like Katherine Anne, Jenny is an unmarried Southerner beginning her artistic career (Katherine Anne wrote while Jenny paints). Porter made this journey with Eugie Pressly, an American, whom she married only in 19"1. Jenny is also single and travelling with a man, David Scott, who is also an American. The same kind of love-hate relationship that Porter enjoyed with Pressly is mirrored in the Jenny-David relationship. Jenny is Porter's major spokeswoman throughout the novel. Many descriptions that Porter gave in her letter to Gordon are attributed to Jenny in the book, examples being the terrific storm at Vetacruz, the Vera's docking at Tenerife and the description of the Isle of Wight.

Basing fiction on truth, Porter demonstrates her ability to absorb and reflect the past, by drawing authentic pictures of the setting and of the behavior of each individual. Seven nationalities are aboard the ship Vera -Germans, Mexicans, Americans, Swiss, Spanish, Swedish and Cubans. Porter lived in Germany, in Mexico and of course, in America, and knew these places and people intimately. The presentation of people from the other nations gains authenticity from the author's search for facts. Depicting her awareness of the times, Porter said in an interview: ... 1931 was a crucial year, with revolutions in Mexico, South America, and Spain. Mussolini was in power in Italy, Hitler reaching for power in Germany. In Cuba the bottom was out of the sugar market and there were shipping strikes in every harbor. Cuban ports were choked with idle ships, sugar fields were burning, and all the workers brought to Cuba from Spain and the Canary Islands were being deported. In Havana we saw them driven aboard ship like cattle (Ruoff and Smith 1963:396). And all this is depicted in exact terms in Ship of Fools.

The Vera is a German ship and a majority of the passengers travelling first class are Germans. While portraying the Germans, Porter has in mind the situation as it existed in 1931, drawing on her own experiences aboard the Werra and on her stay in Berlin. The German antipathy towards the Americans, the feeling that America let them down during World War I, the German hatred for anything French, are all exhibited in Ship of Fools. The Ship's captain, Captain Thiele, is the embodiment of the German sense of duty.

The anti-Semitic feeling that prevailed in the 19305, especially among Germans, is emphasized throughout this book. Herr Lowenthal, the only Jew on this ship and German at that, is given a separate table in the dining-room, where he eats alone. The actual feelings of the entire German group sitting at the Captain's table are made explicit when they discover that one of them, Herr Freytag, has a Jewish wife. They all feel cheated and angry. The Captain expels Freytag from his table and seats him with Herr Lowenthal. Most of the comments against Jews are made by Herr Reiber and Lizzie, who feels that "... if we can find some means to drive all Jews out of Germany, our national greatness will then assert itself and tomorrow we shall have a free world" (Porter 1962:212-213). The best way to get rid of unwanted people according to Reiber (he says this of the 876 steerage passengers) is "I would put them all in a big oven and turn on the gas" (ibidem:59). This is hindsight wisdom, considering what was to happen to the Jews in Germany. A premonition of disaster, a sense of doom felt by the average German in the 1930s, is depicted through Herr Freytag. He is going to Germany to take his wife and her mother back to Mexico. In conversation with Mrs. Treadwell he says, "... maybe you don't know Germany? Things are very uncertain there for us, and getting worse . . ." (ibidem:257). The arrogance of the German, who felt that his was the only race capable of ruling the world, comes through in Captain Thiele's thoughts. He thinks that the Germanic force of life is the very spirit of civilization. These feelings surface even in Freytag, who is proud to be a German, who feels that the powerful German strain will "purify" all foreign blood.

German idealism is depicted in the long discourse delivered by Herr Professor Hutten at the dinner table who believes in the "absolute benevolence of God." And Dr. Schumann expresses Porter's philosophy of life that evil doers are not as reprehensible as those who condone evil, those who allow evil to occur. Porter's theory was that
man's indifference to violence made possible the rise of Nazi Germany. This indifference was responsible for the holocaust that eclipsed the world during World War II.

Aboard the Vera, Porter's Mexican characters remain in the background, but yet exhibit typical traits that she has brought into sharper focus in her short stories - the superstitious Indian maid, the vociferous political agitator, and the unstable political situation are all portrayed faithfully, though briefly, in this novel. Her disillusionment with Mexico is also depicted in her scathing comments on the Veracruzanos. They live as iniciates in local custom reflecting their own history and temperament, and they carry on their lives of alternate violence and lethargy with a pleasurable contempt for outside opinion, founded on the charmed notion that their ways and feelings are above and beyond criticism (ibidem:3).

There are only four Americans aboard the Vera - Jenny Brown, Mary Treadwell, David Scott and William Denny. The first two are autobiographical, the third is modeled on Eugene Pressly, and William Denny is a combination of two characters on board the actual ship Werra. Denny is from Texas and becomes a caricature of Southern values. His pride in his aristocratic background borders on arrogance and insolence. He looks down upon the "greasers," the "niggers," the "polacks," and the "wops," and takes his high place in society for granted because of his "natural superiority of race and class." Herr Lutz, the hotel-keeper from Mexico, returning to his War.

He says, In Switzerland it was the Germans and the British and the French and the Spanish and the Central European Jews and oh, my God, in the old days the Russians who drove us to our graves (ibidem: 101). Havana is the ship of fools' first port of call. When the Vera docks at Havana, Porter (ibidem: 59) takes advantage of the situation to report on conditions in Cuba and the necessity for 876 passengers, mostly Spanish, to embark on this ship in the steerage: Cuban sugar, because of international competition, had fallen in price until the sugar planters could no longer afford to gather and market the-if crops. There had been strikes and riots too, and demands for higher wages at the very moment of crisis as always, due to the presence of foreign labor agitators among the workers. The planters were burning their crops in the fields, and naturally this had thrown thousands of sugar workers in the fields and refineries out of employment. A great number of these were Spanish, mostly from the Canaries, Andalusia, the Asturias, who had been imported during the great days of Cuban Sugar.

It is these Spanish workers who have been taken aboard the Vera and who will be made to disembark at Tenerife and Vigo. Also at Havana, La Condesa boards the Vera. She is a Spanish noblewoman who has lived in Cuba for many years. She is now being politically exiled to Tenerife. It was suspected that she had a hand in the student riots in Cuba, which led to the closure of the University - all facts which are being used in fiction. Porter's letter to Gordon confirms the presence of La Condesa on the real ship Werra. In actual fact, most of the characters on the Vera reminisce about their past. This illustrates the importance of the past in the present consciousness of the characters. It also illustrates the need to relate this past to present circumstances. The Germans, when they think of the past, think of the glory of their fatherland. They try and relate their glory to their present vision of their country, hoping for the best. Ironically, the reader knows what is in store for these Germans, after the end of World War II. Jenny, when she thinks of the past says: "The past is never where you think you left it: you are not the same person you were yesterday" (ibidem:146). Herr Lutz, while talking about his past, tells the reader about the situation in Mexico and in Switzerland. And La Condesa, while reminiscing about her past, gives the reader an idea of the political strife in Cuba.

Ship of Fools is a scathing comment on the tragic failure of the life of man in the Western world. On the one hand, probing the turbulence of the 1930's, Porter gives an impression that evil is banal and mankind has lost the capacity to love. On the other hand, Katherine Anne demonstrates how a great novel can be written while keeping in mind the historical background: And tied as the novel is to crucial historical events such as the worldwide depression of the 1930's and the coming of fascism, the over-all effect is that of a novelist, as confident in her sense of moral order as Dickens or Balzac" creating the private history of an age (Warren 1979:137).

REFERENCES