

## THE FICTION AND CRITICISM OF KATHERINE ANNE PORTER

Katherine Anne Porter is an anomaly in contemporary American literature. The amount of her published work is very small, and her reputation is extremely high with nearly all schools of modern critics. But, to some extent at least, her success has been largely critical; she has never had the popular acclaim of Ernest Hemingway or even William Faulkner. Her lack of general popularity is no doubt partly attributable to the fact that she has chosen to work in two of the forms with which the reading public has least patience: the short story and its cousin, the *nouvelle*. All of Miss Porter's fiction has been collected in three books: *Flowering Judas and Other Stories* (originally published in 1930, and republished, with four additional stories, in 1935), *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939), and *The Leaning Tower and Other Stories* (1944). One other book, *The Days Before*, a collection of essays and occasional pieces, appeared in 1952. For some time Miss Porter has been engaged in writing a novel, to be entitled *No Safe Harbor*, four fragments of which have appeared in *Harper's Magazine* during the last four years.

Miss Porter's work has been praised for various reasons, but mainly for its high level of technical accomplishment in matters of style, form, precision, and so on. Too often, reviewers and serious critics alike have stressed these qualities in her writing at the expense of its substance, and the extraordinary unity of meaning and feeling in her prose has been almost ignored. Style and form, in Miss Porter's fiction, represent the most direct means to a given end: rendering a particular facet of human life in an attempt to arrive at its significance. Miss Porter does not, so far as I can see, experiment with forms or techniques, and her style in one story is a good deal like her style in another, though, of course, its tone may and frequently does change. But she represents, as she herself indicates in numerous passages in *The Days Before*, the kind of writer who has something to say rather than the writer who consciously strives for perfection of style or form. The clarity of her style and the precision of her language add greatly to the power of what she has to say, of course, but it is the meaning of human experience as she visualizes it which is of most significance.

Perhaps the most baffling thing of all about Miss Porter's achievement is its nearly incredible consistency; both lesser and greater writers may be approached through their faults or through their deflections from recognized standards. Miss Porter, however, is nearly faultless

within the limits of her work: were her output broader, she might well be the foremost writer on the American scene. Some of the statements in *The Days Before* relate the limitations of her work to the history of her age, and this is not unlikely. For, first and foremost, Miss Porter writes as a woman of her particular time, a witness of a special kind of human experience as well as of a unique and terrible chapter in the history of mankind. Her fiction reveals a consistent vision of the issues of the present age, dramatized and given meaning through the meaning of her art. It is the purpose of this paper to indicate what that meaning is, and to examine those particular kinds of experience in which Miss Porter seems most interested and which form the central patterns of her work.