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View from a falling house

by [Eric Ormsby](#)

Katherine Anne Porter came from “the soft blackland farming country” of north central Texas. The touch and the smell of that dark earth would stay with her for the rest of her long life. Born in 1890 in Indian Creek—then still a frontier settlement—she died, laden with honors, in 1980, in Silver Spring, Maryland. She lived on the move until well into old age; in a late interview, she calculated that she had resided at more than fifty addresses in her lifetime. She was restlessness incarnate. She married four times, once divorcing within a year, and had numerous love affairs, often shedding her lovers as briskly as she changed addresses.

Nothing of this appears in her prose; her sentences display an unhurried, even classical, aplomb. Nor was she quick to publish: She wrote “Holiday,” one of her greatest stories, in the 1920s, but it only appeared, in *The Atlantic Monthly*, in 1960. And “Noon Wine,” easily her masterpiece, though written quickly—“in seven days of trancelike absorption” in 1936, at a country inn in Doylestown, Pennsylvania—sembled scattered “fragments of memory” from some forty years earlier. Style, for Porter, was a matter of patience; it involved a slow, painstaking distillation of all that she had seen and remembered. In reading her, one has the sense that just beneath the lucid surface of her prose lies a fierce concentration of experience, salvaged from an unusually peripatetic life yet so thoroughly pondered, plumbed, and assimilated that it renders up the exact quintessence of a long vanished moment with startled urgency.

The new Library of America selection of Porter’s fiction and essays lets us see, for the first time whole, how that remote Texas “blackland” formed the abiding ground, the rich stuff, out of which even her most cosmopolitan stories, whether set in revolutionary Mexico or 1930s Berlin, emerged. [1] Darlene Harbour Unrue, the editor, has included Porter’s three classic collections of stories—*Flowering Judas and Other Stories*, (1930), *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939), and *The Leaning Tower and Other Stories* (1944)—as well as a judicious selection of her essays and reviews, a number of which illumine the fiction to telling effect. Porter’s many essays on Mexico, which she once called her “second home,” conclude the volume, followed by a detailed and quite vivid Chronology which amounts to a succinct biography of Porter in its own right. (Only *Ship of Fools*, the novel over which she labored for more than two decades and finally published in 1962 to great, and justified, acclaim, is omitted, for reasons that are left unexplained.)

To read the stories and essays in tandem is to see that the Texas blackland of her origins formed a moral as well as geographical locale for Porter; it was the heartland of what she liked to call “the Old Order,” the capital letters themselves signaling the combination of affectionate irony and exasperated nostalgia that her place of birth inspired in her. In an obvious sense, this was, of course, the old South. It is too easy to forget that the urbane and globe-trotting Porter was very much a

Southern writer and saw herself as such: she would later foster and promote the careers of both Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor (though she detested the fey Carson McCullers). In her essay on the writing of "Noon Wine," she speaks of it as one of "the stories of my own place, my South," but it could be argued—and shown, I think—that all her fiction speaks with a soft but unmistakable Southern accent. Even so, Porter's notion of "the Old Order" goes deeper than this. It stands for a period, within the living memory of her characters, when a set of shared certainties prevailed. It stands for other, less savory things too, not only slavery and the rankling memory of its brutal injustice but the meticulous codes of conduct laid down for men and especially women, justified by nothing more persuasive than long-established custom. (Porter, though too individualistic to be labeled a feminist, rebelled against such restrictions from an early age. And she was outspoken in her condemnation of racial prejudice, resigning in 1943 from the National Institute of Arts and Letters in protest against its policy of identifying potential candidates as "Negro.")

In portraying the Old Order, both in the wonderful sequence of stories of that title in her third and last collection, *The Leaning Tower and Other Stories* and in several personal essays, such as "Notes on the Texas I Remember," Porter never waxes sentimental; her take on the past is loving but sharp-eyed. Her concern is neither to glorify the past nor to condemn it, but to see it as it was. It wouldn't be quite correct to say that the past nourished her imagination, although it clearly did. Rather, it gave her an elusive purchase on the present; the Old Order cast the new disorder into clear and terrifying relief. A passage from "The Journey" in which the Grandmother and "Aunt Nannie," her former slave become her lifelong friend and companion, reminisce, captures this perfectly:

They talked about the past, really—always about the past. Even the future seemed like something gone and done with when they spoke of it. It did not seem an extension of their past, but a repetition of it. They would agree that nothing remained of life as they had known it, the world was changing swiftly, but by the mysterious logic of hope they insisted that each change was probably the last; or if not, a series of changes might bring them, blessedly, back full-circle to the old ways they had known. Who knows why they loved their past? It had been bitter for them both, they had questioned the burdensome rule they lived by every day of their lives.

The two old women may have no doubt as to the "utter rightness and justice of the basic laws of human existence, founded as they were on God's plan," and yet, even so, they cannot help wondering "how so much suffering and confusion could have been built up and maintained on such a foundation."

That is precisely the question which runs like a refrain through all of Porter's finest writing, from the terrible downfall of Royal Earle Thompson in "Noon Wine" to "The Never-Ending Wrong," her caustic and impassioned account of the Sacco and Vanzetti trial, in which the two anarchists' Communist supporters are portrayed as more cold-blooded and corrupt than the judicial system which condemned them. The Old Order contained more than its share of wickedness, its strictures prompted murmurings, but, to the retrospective eye, it possessed a recognizable moral clarity. Porter knew that this was a comforting illusion, but she shared it to a certain extent, even as she fought to escape it. Much later she would write of her childhood home, "I got out of that place as if I were leaving a falling house in an earthquake."

Porter did get out. She hobnobbed with Sergei Eisenstein in Mexico; danced with Hermann Göring (whom she found repulsive) in Berlin; met Joyce and Eliot and Hemingway (who snubbed her) in Paris; let Hart Crane share her lodgings in Mexico, though his drunken tirades unnerved her; she was even interviewed by Alfred Kinsey and turned the tables on the old lecher by inquiring about his sex life. Even so, you might say that the view from that falling house stayed with her. It gave her a longing for certainties even as she mistrusted them. Though she became quite grand, an apotheosis of the Southern Belle, she remained wary of grandeur. Under the glamour and sophistication, she

retained a country simplicity, a stubborn common sense. It was this underlying gumption which prompted her when she was eighty-four—to the horrified astonishment of her friends—to send off for a plain wooden mail-order coffin for herself, in the “Mexican style,” which she painted and afterwards kept propped up in her bedroom closet. This was the same spirit that enabled her to launch her devastating attacks on such phoneys as Gertrude Stein, describing her “tepid, sluggish nature, really sluggish like something eating its way through a leaf,” or the D. H. Lawrence of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, a book she condemned not for its “obscurity” but for its “misuse and perversions of obscenity.”

If Porter’s eye could be unsparing, it also allowed her to see a hidden dignity in the disregarded. When she describes the acerbic Aunt Eva in “Old Mortality”—an ugly old maid, the perennial wallflower at glittering balls who ends up as a small-town Latin teacher—she conveys all her integrity as well as her loneliness in an image of her grotesque hat, “a wilted contrivance of black horsehair braid and shattered white poppies.” This most articulate of story-tellers had a deep sympathy for the mute, whether for the retarded boy in “He” who “had learned a few words, and after this He forgot them” (the capital letters conferring a sort of damaged divinity on him) or for the deformed sister in “Holiday” who cannot speak but pulls from a jumbled dresser drawer a faded photo of herself as a healthy child, to show the narrator, as if to say, “This is who I really am underneath.”

In fact, all of Porter’s most memorable characters foot a precarious path along the trickiest of margins. They don’t cling to anything quite so grandiose as Graham Greene’s “dangerous edge of things.” They feel their way across a terrain, a moral blackland, which is always on the verge of fissure; they are denizens of the dubious edge of things, caught between the collapse of the Old Order and the dim but jagged contours of a new and unprecedented disorder too terrible to face. Porter knew the dilemma all too well. In “Holiday,” she wrote,

Even I felt divided into many fragments, having left or lost a part of myself in every place I had travelled, in every life mine had touched, above all, in every death of someone near to me that had carried into the grave some part of my living cells.

If the answer lay in the blackland of the past, it was not in its shimmering old certainties but in its rich confusions. Only in the tale could those scattered fragments be gathered and joined together again; only in the patient recollections of prose could the past—and with luck, the present—somehow be made whole once more.

Notes

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1. *Collected Stories and Other Writings*, by Katherine Anne Porter, edited by Darlene Harbour Unrue; The Library of America, 1,093 pages, \$40. [Go back to the text.](#)

Eric Ormsby's latest book is *Ghazali* (Oneworld). Eric Ormsby was born in Atlanta, raised in Miami, and now lives in Montreal, where he is a professor in the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University. His Poetry has appeared in most of the major journals in Canada, England and the U.S., including *The New Yorker*, *The New Republic*, *Paris Review*, *Descant*, *Parnassus* and *The Oxford American*. In recent years he has been a regular contributor of essays and reviews to *The New Criterion*, as well as to *Parnassus*, *Books in Canada* and *The Yale Review*. His first collection of poems, *Bavarian Shrine and other poems*, appeared in 1990 and won the QSpell Award for 1991. In the following year he received an Ingram Merrill Foundation Award for “outstanding work as a poet.” His 1992 collection entitled *Coastlines* was a finalist for the QSpell Award of that year. A third collection, *For a Modest God: New and Selected Poems* appeared in 1997 with Grove Press in

New York. His work has been anthologized in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* as well as in *The Norton Introduction to Literature*. A fourth collection of poems, entitled *Araby*, appeared in 2001 with Signal Editions (Montreal). A collection of essays, most originally published in *The New Criterion*, will appear in Fall 2001. As a scholar, Ormsby specializes in medieval Islamic theology and philosophy and regularly contributes articles to academic journals in that field. He has travelled widely in the Islamic world as a researcher and a consultant. He is married, with two sons, and lives with his wife Irena, an architectural historian in Montreal.

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