The Spinet and the Coffin: Katherine Anne Porter and the Art of Music: Four Movements with Prelude and Coda

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Four Movements with Prelude and Coda[1]

Prelude

IN THE FINAL YEARS OF HER LIFE, FINANCIALLY MORE SECURE THAN AT ANY other time, Katherine Anne Porter was able to furnish her environment according to her tastes. Among the prominent objects from her Maryland home now displayed in the Katherine Anne Porter Room at the University of Maryland's Hornbake Library are two large, boxlike items. The first is a plain wooden coffin. Porter acquired it in 1973 from a mail order firm either in Arizona or in Montana—there is scholarly disagreement on this important question[2]—and, according to Darlene Unrue, "told everybody she was pleased with it" (*Life* 283). The second is a spinet, "made in Paris, [of] fruit woods (pear, rose) and ebony, copied from one in the Bibliot[hè]que Nationale (1520), [with] hand carved keys," according to the inventory of her possessions (*Guide*). The inventory also notes "3 steel strings for virginal, purchased by KAP in Paris, 19 August 1936," though the terminological difference may just be a confusion of the archivist. The terms "spinet" and "virginal" are often used interchangeably, yet they denote two different instruments; the virginal is strung parallel to the keyboard and therefore has a rectangular case, the spinet is strung diagonally, allowing for longer strings and a more resonant tone, which is further enhanced by its triangular or wing-shaped case. In contradistinction to a harpsichord or piano, neither a

[1]This essay is dedicated to the memory of Rolland Comstock, Esq. and bibliophile extraordinaire, 1936-2007.

[2]Unrue locates the coffin maker's shop in Arizona, Paul Porter locates it in Montana. See Porter, "Last Word," n.p. According to Unrue, there is material in Porter's papers that would support either Montana or Arizona as the source of the coffin. Unrue suggests that "Arizona" may imply closer proximity to Mexico (personal communication with author).

virginal nor a spinet normally has legs,[3] making it a portable tabletop instrument and evoking the visual similarity to a coffin. In his 1951 story, "The Resemblance between a Violin Case and a Coffin," Tennessee Williams similarly notes the visual resemblance of a case for a musical instrument and a case for a corpse.

The iconic connection between the two wooden objects in Porter's room of memorabilia is enhanced by her preferred literary motifs which, in turn, shed light on her musical predilections. Death and music, separately and together, are prominent in Porter's storytelling. Beginning with "María Concepción," Porter focused many of her narratives around death. Her most famous and familiar tales, from "The Grave" to "Flowering Judas" to "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall," either enact the physical death of a protagonist or use the death motif to enhance the initiation of a central character. Death can be an existential experience, such as when Miranda discovers that the rabbit shot by her brother was pregnant or when Laura cannot sleep because of her instrumental involvement in Eugenio's death or when Granny Weatherall loses her faith on her deathbed. Death can also occur in the violence of either homicide or suicide as, for example, in "Hacienda" and "Noon Wine." In "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," the story written in recollection of Porter's own dramatic near-death experience in Denver during the influenza pandemic, Adam's sacrificial death haunts Miranda's imagination. Finally, the titles "Noon Wine" and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" themselves refer to songs about death mentioned in the stories and thus link death and music.

While death is not a necessary ingredient of musical literature, music and death are familiar friends, as it were, in both the operatic and *Lieder* traditions. *Lieder* are short, intensely felt songs that originate in the folk tradition or with a lyrical poem. They were raised to a high form of art by such Romantic composers as Schubert, Schumann, and Mendelssohn and continued to attract other composers—Brahms, Wolf, Mahler—deep into the nineteenth century and beyond. Franz Schubert's string quartet *Death and the Maiden* from 1826, for example, though not a *Lied*, evokes death in its programmatic title as strongly as did his earlier use of Matthias Claudius' short lyrical dialogue poem, "Der Tod und das Mädchen," in a setting for voice. And while Porter occasionally seems to reject anything having to do with literary romanticism, she was raised

[3]"Spinet." The conclusion about resonant tone is my own.

on a literary diet of Percy's *Reliques* and the poems of Edgar Allan Poe (Unrue, *Life* 22). Poe's work abounds in death and maidens, as he famously coined the phrase, "the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world" (19).

For Katherine Anne Porter, the romantic adumbrations of music were enhanced by her own closeness to folk traditions of music; and folk traditions, in turn, shaped her views about encountering death. The impromptu *corrido* sung by Carlos in "Hacienda" is a case in point, as folk, music, and death seamlessly come together:

> *Ah, poor little Rosalita*
> *Took herself a new lover, . . .*
>
> *Now she lies dead, poor Rosalita,*
> *With two bullets in her heart.* (*Collected Stories* 160)

On her third trip to Mexico, in 1923, Porter wrote an essay on *corridos* that appeared in *Survey Graphic* in May 1924 (*Uncollected* 194-200). She characterizes the *corrido* as "a ballad," adding that "Mexico is one of the few countries where a genuine folk poetry still exists. . . . The stories are always concerned with immediate fundamental things; death, love, acts of vengeance, the appalling malignities of Fate" (195-96). Mexico did not just bring Porter's emotional depth and her literary talent to full fruition; it also embodied for her the intrinsic connection between music and death. Though her Mexican coffin as displayed today is painted, Porter was originally attracted to a coffin that would suggest the simplicity of a Mexican country burial. Analogously, her relationship with music, which had been fostered in the romantically saturated singing repertoire for young girls in San Antonio, reached maturity in her study of folk music in Mexico and France.

Music occupied Porter intermittently throughout her life. According to Unrue, who quotes Katherine Anne's sister's recollections, Porter as a very young child sang "little made-up songs" standing on a little foot stool, scandalizing the visiting Baptist minister as well as assorted other pious relatives (*Life* 22). After her escape in 1914 from her abusive first husband, Porter spent some time visiting her sisters in Beaumont, Texas and Gibsland, Louisiana, and faced the urgent need to make a living:

> She discovered . . . that local preachers were booking entertainers in the three-state region and that she could earn twenty-five dollars for each engagement on the

> backwoods lyceum circuit. She . . . worked up a program of songs taken from Francis Child's *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* [and] opened her program with a selection of mournful ballads about untimely deaths, missed chances, and betraying lovers. (Unrue, *Life* 53)

The thematic resemblance between this repertoire and her observations about Mexican *corridos* is striking. The sentimental and slightly sensational tinge of the lyceum repertoire blurs Porter's self-proclaimed rejection of romanticism.

Music is inextricably connected with the setting for some of Porter's most memorable fictions. Characters such as Laura in "Flowering Judas," Mr. Helton in "Noon Wine," Miranda in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," and Charles Upton in "The Leaning Tower" develop in reaction to the music they encounter. Music is bound up with Porter's tragic vision of life as surely as any of the other arts she engaged with. Music's ability to express vast emotions suited her expansive temperament. The formal characteristics of Western music—especially the repetition and stanzaic form of the *Lieder* tradition—found an echo in Porter's poems as well as in her *French Song-Book*. Music's performative aspect, its characteristic as an art displayed in time rather than in space, resonated with Porter's *mise-en-scène* of herself.[4]

I: Modernist writing and the role of music / Andante

While writing is obviously the art that defines Porter, many scholars invoke other arts as ancillary to her artistic genius, especially caricature and the decorative arts, while generally neglecting music. Joan Givner, one of Porter's earliest biographers, offers some details, but a sustained discussion of the relevance of music in Porter's work is still missing.[5]

[4]For Porter's penchant towards self-dramatization, see especially Stout, *A Sense of the Times*.

[5]See Walsh, who comments on Porter's use of caricature as a result of her Mexican experience, 66-67, 179, 212ff. Mary Titus discusses decorative arts especially in chapters 3 and 8 and writes convincingly about Porter's use of "costume as a metaphor for gender roles" (12). Givner describes the lasting memories Porter had of her music lessons at the Thomas School in San Antonio, references her brief spell of piano lessons in 1930 (230), and places great importance on the presence of music, especially the playing of phonograph records, in Porter's life in 1945 (353). Unrue, using Eudora Welty as a source of the writers' friendship in 1941, also describes Porter's love of gramophone recordings "from Piaf back to Gluck, back to madrigals, the opera *Orphée*" (*Life* 185).

Porter's nephew Paul Porter has provided insight into his aunt's musical tastes in his essay "Remembering Aunt Katherine." In a few lines, he makes clear that Porter's musical instincts were considerably more traditional than her modernist literary taste:

> Eleanor Clark said that Katherine Anne Porter had an intense but limited interest in music. I know exactly what she meant. Aunt Katherine refreshed and elated her soul with the music of Monteverdi, Purcell, Handel, Bach, Gluck, and Mozart, but had just a thin scattered interest in the composers who came after Mozart. More than anything else, she loved the songs and dances of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Often she would sing along, in a tuneless whisper, with her recordings of troubadour songs. She detested Wagner, and disliked most of the Romantics. (27)

Detesting Wagner may have been a political rather than a musical choice. Romantic music, however, remains prominent in Porter's fiction and criticism, and Paul Porter's statement about his aunt's dislike of "most of the Romantics" probably refers more to the occasionally bombastic orchestral music of Romantic composers than to the Romantic spirit that inhabits the art song tradition. Bombast is alien to Porter; romanticism is not. Outside of the canonical repertoire of Western music, Porter had emotional access to folk music which found its way into her writings. Ranging from harmonicas to guitars, from crooning love-songs to elegiac death chants, music is a significant presence in Porter's fiction and criticism. The human voice always figures prominently, occasionally supported by an instrument. And some late Romantic, early modern opera met her affective side as well. According to her nephew, "She knew by heart passages from the libretto for the Marschallin's role in *Der Rosenkavalier*, a character with whom she identified in ways" ("Remembering" 27).

As music was reinventing itself in the modernist moment along with literature, a fruitful interaction between modernist prose and modernist music could have occurred in Porter, but the contact among the art forms may not have sufficed for effective germination. One of the truisms about modernism is that it encompassed all the art forms—literature, dance, architecture, painting, music—and that cross-pollination did occur, literature serving as a linchpin of sorts. Michael Bell argues that "a central philosophical feature of Modernism, reworking a strain of romantic thought, is its claim for literature itself as a supreme and irreplaceable form of understanding" (29). But while many of the aesthetic and epistemological motivations behind the

modernist revolution were shared among the branches of art, their respective abilities to change the public's perception and taste turned out to be widely divergent. All modernist arts share to some extent a desire to reject historical models, realistic representation, and a false front of order. They share techniques such as shock value in the shattering of expectation, fragmentation, and non-historicity. They share psychoanalytical influences, an early belief in science and mechanization in the Futurist movement, and experimentation—with new tonalities in music, language experiments in fiction, free verse in poetry, pointillism in painting, Bauhaus functionalism in architecture, and expressionism in dance. But iconoclastic tendencies of modernism notwithstanding, modernist arts do not occur in a vacuum. Philosophically and stylistically, Porter was close to T. S. Eliot, who in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" considered every work of art inextricably related to—and in turn influencing—the tradition from which it emerged. An important distinction needs to be made among the various arts. While painting, architecture, and dance successfully transformed "the tastes and practices of 20th -century mass culture" ("Modernism" 870, col. 2), modernism in music by and large failed to accustom the listening public to dodecaphonic style. Classic and romantic compositions continue to fill concert halls; many listeners today still find contemporary music notoriously difficult to understand. Porter, too, thrived on older musical tastes.

Innovations in literature were perhaps more sustained than in music, but neo-realism persisted and returned with a vengeance until postmodernism once again broke with mimesis. Katherine Anne Porter, one of the most acclaimed stylists of her generation, a painstaking and exemplary modernist in many ways, nonetheless did not embrace the musical innovations offered by modernism during her historical moment, but deliberately returned to older, conventional musical forms and expressions to buttress her literary art. Porter's musical sense remained thoroughly grounded in nineteenth-century tonality even as she shaped her prose into the accomplished style that her contemporaries revered and that her present-day readers still admire. Porter connected with folk music because of its access to raw emotion, but when it came to her preferences in music history, she made the same choice she had made with her own prose style in preferring elegance to innovation.

II: *Katherine Anne Porter's French Song-Book* / Scherzo, con brio

In 1932 in Paris, having just left behind a wintry Germany, Porter turned her full artistic attention to music. A year later, in the spring of 1933, again in Paris after interludes in Madrid and Basel, she married Eugene Pressly on March 11; and on May 15, her forty-third birthday, she put her name beneath the introductory "Note" that would grace her soon-to-be published, exquisitely beautiful volume, *Katherine Anne Porter's French Song-Book*. In these same fifteen months, far across the Rhine, the Nazis—in whose company Porter had spent five-and-a half months from September 1931 to February 1932, in Berlin—were firming up their grip on power.[6] As yet, no one in France had any idea that the country would be overrun in 1940 from across the Rhine and that the swastika would fly from the Arc de Triomphe before the end of the decade. Porter would later claim that she had "felt the very earth of Europe shake under [her] feet when [she] stepped ashore" from the good ship *Werra* in Bremerhaven in 1931 (*Letters* 504). She would date her story "The Leaning Tower," which fictionalizes her encounter with proto-Nazis, "Berlin 1931" when she finally finished it for *The Southern Review* in 1941 (see *Collected Stories* 495). But the earth seemed not to shake in Paris in 1933. Had she spent her time then writing *Ship of Fools*, and had she published the novel thirty years before its eventual appearance in print, it would likely have been hailed as a seminal work of mature modernism. It would certainly have been among the most potent statements of the Nazi threat, even predating Kay Boyle's 1936 unique Austrian idyll, *Death of a Man*. Katherine Anne Porter might have changed history. Instead, she turned her artistic attention to music.

Approaching her forty-third birthday, Porter was at the height of her artistic potential. In retrospect, we can see that she had reached about the mid-point of her life. *Flowering Judas* had been published in the year she turned forty, 1930, in an edition of six hundred copies (Unrue, *Life* 127-8). *Pale Horse, Pale Rider: Three Short Novels* would see the light of day in 1938.

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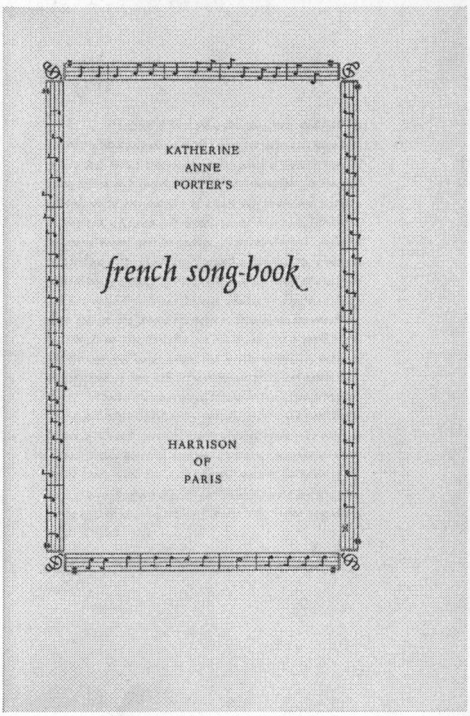
[6]For a discussion of Porter's emotionally tinged response to her winter in Berlin, see Austenfeld, chapter 3.



Title page, *Katherine Anne Porter's French Song Book*, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library.

Compared with the moral heft of Porter's writing about the Nazis in the late novel *Ship of Fools* and the stylistic loving-kindness of her most famous short stories, *The French Song-Book* is a slighter work with enormous visual appeal to add to its musical aura.[7] It is a frivolous exercise in the best sense of that word: amusing, trifling, of little seriousness. The outward trappings, the dressing-up of the content in "Guarro hand-made paper" bound in "three-quarters morocco" make a bold statement.[8] There are two versions of the edition: fifteen copies numbered in Roman numerals are decked out in the exquisite features I just described. The spine is embossed with three

[7]Unrue reports that Ford Madox Ford, with whom Porter shared a love of ballads and folk songs, brokered the contract for this book (personal communication with the author).

[8]The bibliographic description of the editions is quoted from the catalog entry in the Clifton Waller Barrett Library of American Literature, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library. In March of 2006, I had the good fortune of spending several hours in the presence of Porter's beautiful book in the Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia, which holds # XIII of the fifteen signed copies. *Katherine Anne Porter's Poetry* allows readers without access to the rare book the opportunity to consult the textual content of the *French Song-Book*.

black raised ridges, inlaid with red leather. Slim and elegant, the book could double as either a prayer-book or a trade ledger. The title page prints the author, title, and publisher within a stylized rectangular frame composed of small single lines of music that, on close inspection, turn out to be the notes for "Sur le pont d'Avignon." That song is included later in the book, with Porter's wry note: "This is rather like including 'The Farmer in the Dell' in a book of English songs translated into French, but in such a book 'The Farmer in the Dell' should be included" (Porter, *Poetry* 135).

The remaining 595 copies are printed on Van Gelder pure-rag paper and bound in blue boards with cloth backstrip. These "lesser" versions currently sell on the rare book market for at least $300 each.[9]

Like the 1922 *Outline of Mexican Popular Arts and Crafts* Porter had compiled eleven years earlier to accompany the traveling exhibition of Mexican artifacts to Los Angeles,[10] *The French Song-Book* is rooted in folk culture. Mexico and folk culture had been joined in Porter's mind ever since her early visits to that country, and so it is no surprise that she celebrated France through an approach to folk culture as well. Perhaps Porter's extraordinary contributions to style and observation in her fiction owe more than we have acknowledged so far to her closeness to folkways. In "A Folklorist Looks at Katherine Anne Porter," Sylvia Ann Grider points to the "intensive scrutiny" that folklorists give to the "*family saga*, the collective folk-memory of a family's ancestors and history" (xviii-xix), suggesting that Porter's elaborate family history should be seen in this context. In any case, much of Porter's musical appreciation is connected with the folk. William Graham Sumner had opined in 1906—incidentally the year of Porter's first marriage—that "the notion of right is in the folkways" (28), as he was trying to build a whole system of ethics on tradition, facticity, and ancestors' laws. Sumner was a better sociologist than philosopher. I have found his ethics suspect ever since I realized that the question implied in the title of his earlier book of 1883, *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other*, has a simple answer: Nothing. In *Folkways*, Sumner cavalierly disregarded the old philosophical adage than one cannot deduce an "ought" from an "is"; that is to say, it is illegitimate to say that something is right just because

[9]For example, http://www.jeffreythomas.com (accessed March 20, 2006).

[10]See Unrue, *Life*, 91-93; Walsh, 57-63.

it is fact. The last person to seriously hold that "whatever is, is right" was Alexander Pope. But short of building one's ethics on folkways, one may certainly celebrate folkways as a source of culture.

Porter's attraction to folkways must have begun with her early training in singing and music in San Antonio. Darlene Unrue describes Porter's taking violin and singing lessons at Our Lady of the Lake Convent while enrolled as a day student at the Thomas School in 1904 and 1905 (*Life* 34). When she performed intermittently, she sang popular ballads. An acknowledgment of the normative moral force of folkways informs the plots of "María Concepción" and "Virgin Violeta," where instinctual judgment and communitarian history are given preference over private ethical reasoning in the women protagonists' actions. Folkways underlie the attention Porter pays to Braggioni's courting of Laura in "Flowering Judas," just as folkways are at the bottom of the offensive ethnic prejudice displayed by the characters in "The Leaning Tower." By the end of the 1920s, Mexico and folk culture were inseparable for Porter. Coincidentally, her 1930 visit to Mexico also provided the occasion for an intense six-week course of instruction in piano and music theory, provided by Pablo O'Higgins (Givner 230, Unrue 127). Also in 1930, Porter contributed a translation of a folk song she entitled "Music of the Official Jarabe and Verses" to the magazine *Mexican Folkways,* edited by Frances Toor (Walsh 146, n17). The *French Song-Book*, two years later, was then a natural flowering of this folkloristic impulse in a different geographical setting.

Along with the songs, by 1932/33, Porter was ready to offer her readers something approaching an artistic manifesto. "My choice of these particular songs for a small collection is neither arbitrary nor casual," she says in her prefatory "Note" (*French Song-Book*, also *Poetry* 95). Why this particular insistence? Are these the two strongest charges that could be leveled against the collection? "Among [the various] kinds I chose first for musical beauty, next for poetical and historical interest." Porter presents herself as a judge of musical beauty first, even before "poetical . . . interest," a category that would include interesting rhymes and rhythmical forms. Since only the melody line is printed with the stanzas and Porter speaks dismissively of "trite accompaniments meant for the family piano" (95-96), I assume that she envisages a performance of these songs by a single voice, at most a voice accompanied by a supportive melody instrument. That minimalist musical setting conforms to Porter's

preferences and to her usual portrayal of music in her fiction. Such a performance would put a great deal of attention on the words which, in turn, would subject Porter's translation of the French songs to scrutiny. We now know that Porter's stylistic and poetical skills in English considerably exceeded her skills in translating from the French. Porter had some help with rough translations from Willard and Mary Trask but she herself gave the lyrics their final shape.[11] The contemporary reviewers, the only ones who seem to have paid attention to the book, accordingly focused on the words, not the tunes: both the *New York Herald Tribune* and the *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Paris) offered tribute to Porter's ability to "convey more of the original spirit than is usually conveyed in song translations" (Hilt and Alvarez 261, J11). Again, "We can only admire the delicacy of taste and the skill in translation" (Hilt and Alvarez 261, J12). Aesthetics and sentiment, then, not politics, dominate the songs.

III: The Music of Dionysus / Allegro con fuoco

Porter's literary characters have an ambiguous relationship to music, musicians, and musical instruments, and perceive them frequently as threatening. Thomas Mann's "Death in Venice" (1912) is a relevant precursor, not only because Mann's novella form is similar to what Porter terms a "short novel" (*Collected Stories* 6). We know from Porter's letters that she valued Mann's novellas for their author's ability "to persuade me to accept his version as true, his insight as real" (*Letters* 252). Yet more specifically than "Mario and the Magician," which Porter references in her letter, "Death in Venice" brings together death and music. Near the climax of the story, a satyr-like guitar player terrifies von Aschenbach with his burlesque laughing song and triggers an orgiastic dream sequence which fully reveals to Aschenbach the terrors of acknowledging his repressed sexual impulses. The association of music with sexual terror is eagerly taken up by Porter in one of her most celebrated stories.

In "Flowering Judas," Laura's interest in music first leads her to Mexican folk culture. She "haunts the markets listening to the ballad singers, and stops every day to hear the blind boy playing his reed-flute" (*Collected Stories* 90). Of quite a different caliber is the guitar-playing

[11]Information provided by Unrue, personal communication with the author.

Braggioni, a sexual threat who plucks his instrument as he would pluck Laura's "notorious virginity" (97) if only she would allow it. The gently serenading young man beneath her window is no match for this threat. Unlike Wallace Stevens's "Man with the blue guitar," who does "not play things as they are" (165), Braggioni is identified with his instrument: metonymically, his guitar is an extension of his slow, patient, aggressive self; metaphorically, it is Laura's imagined body under his fingers. In an image that equates the sexual threat with death, "Braggioni curves his swollen fingers around the throat of the guitar and softly smothers the music out of it" (100). In folk culture, death is never far.

Porter applies the musical lessons learned in revolutionary Mexico to the local drama on a South Texas farm. Mr. Helton's harmonica playing that haunts "Noon Wine" is the strongest presence of a sustained sound in the work of Katherine Anne Porter and, true to form, it is simultaneously an exercise in folk music and in Dionysian chaotic threat. The subtext here is murderous violence rather than sexual pursuit, but nonetheless, erotic motives precede the action. Towards the end of the story, readers learn that Helton had first been incarcerated after killing his brother, who had borrowed and lost one of his harmonicas while courting a girl. On the Thompson farm, in a marked difference from his evocative playing, Helton silently shakes the boys when they have messed with his instruments.

Helton never gives voice to his rage; in fact, he rarely voices anything at all. His playing of the "Scandahoovian" (246) drinking song serves as his substitute for speech. Helton maintains a precarious mental health by playing the same song for nine years, a song about drinking up one's liquor before noon that becomes a musical prayer; an insistent, repetitive confession of his sin; at once an incantation and an expiation. Music can support Helton in his delicate equilibrium.

The catastrophe of the story, by contrast, occurs because of words. The opposite of taciturn Helton, voluble Mr. Hatch, the pursuer, talks too much; to Thompson he seems to have "a way of taking the words out of [his] mouth, turning them around and mixing them up" (248). After the killing of Hatch, Mr. Thompson, for all his garrulousness, cannot communicate his sense of confusion to his mistrustful neighbors.[12] Unable to express his feelings in music, as Helton did, Thompson resorts

[12]The distinction between volubility and garrulousness is made by Stout, "Mr. Hatch's Volubility," 285.

to another mode of communication, his suicide note and the unambiguous message that will result once he has shot off the gun into his mouth, silencing himself. Music temporarily served one character in this story as means of mental support, but it could not stave off ultimate death.

Porter's near-death experience in Denver in late 1918[13] finds its fictional expression in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider." In his rhetorical interpretation of that story, Gary M. Ciuba has investigated prosopopeia—the apostrophe of an absence (see 67f)—as a strategy of speaking genuinely "after death," not just with reference to Adam's accomplished death but also to Miranda's own near-death. In Ciuba's reading, singing the spiritual "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" is such a futile exercise in prosopopeia, as are the failed prayers to Jesus and Apollo. Without the proper cultural context, neither prayer nor singing will be efficacious. Both ultimately fail to create "real presences" (in Ciuba's allusion to George Steiner's book by this title). On the final pages of the story, armistice is declared and "a ragged chorus of cracked voices" sings "My country, 'tis of thee" (*Collected Stories* 312). But patriotic songs cannot restore Adam. Miranda next hears "'Oh, say, can you see?' their hopeless voices were asking" (313). Never, to my knowledge, has the opening question of the national anthem, meant to set the stage for a triumphant response, been rendered so bleakly, so hopelessly, with such defeat. Ciuba's analysis of prosopopeia applies here, too, as the singers merely mouth the words that cannot bring the flag—or the republic for which it stands and whose absence it represents through its presence—back to its feet. Earlier in the story, Miranda and Adam had joined a theater crowd in singing "There's a Long, Long Trail A-winding" at the conclusion of a Liberty Bond rally. This sentimental, patriotic song written in 1915 captures perfectly the cold comfort one may derive from the prospect of joining an already-departed loved one in death. The second half of the refrain delays the anticipated reunion into an uncertain future: "There's a long, long night of waiting / Until my dreams all come true; / Till the day when I'll be going down / That long, long trail with you."[14] The narrator reports: "Adam and Miranda joined

[13]See Unrue, *Life*, ch. 7, "Apocalypse in Denver," esp. 61-63.

[14]The song's text and a soundfile are available at http://www.firstworldwar.com/audio/theresalonglongtrailawinding.htm (Accessed July 3, 2007).

in at the tops of their voices, grinning shamefacedly at each other once or twice" (294). Porter here uses music effectively to suggest the initiatory experience that Miranda will shortly undergo. While Adam is still with her, both feel invincible. At the story's end, after Adam's death from influenza, Miranda will only hear cracked voices.

Always alert to the connections between a people's music and its deep-seated feelings, Porter manages to express her disapproval of Germans by making even their use of musical instruments look suspect in "The Leaning Tower." In the bar at New Year's, where Charles Upton will debate race, ethnicity, war and hatred with his fellow boarders, a

> small orchestra moved into the space beside the bar.
>
> Almost every guest, Charles noticed, had brought a musical instrument, a violin or flute or white piano accordion, a clarinet; and one man lumbered in under the burden of a violoncello in a green baize-covered case. (*Collected Stories* 481)

But the instruments will be put to nefarious use. As the evening progresses, the orchestra is heard accompanying a drinking song that talks of war and of the misery of the conscripted soldier's life ("Ich armes welsches Teuflein"; *Collected Stories* 488). Again, the Dionysian threat, this time in the form of war-mongering, is closely associated with music. Music remained for Porter a deeply divided art, more often associated with danger than with pleasure.

IV: Music and Order: A Brief Apollonian Moment / Con moto, brilliante

On occasion, Porter invoked music in her critical writing. In her introduction to *"This Strange, Old World" and Other Book Reviews*, Darlene Unrue remarks that Porter's reviews, collectively, "define, implicitly and explicitly, the critical apparatus that Porter applied to others' works and that underlies the aesthetic assumptions in her own fiction" (xi). Readers will find relatively few musical references in these reviews. Porter's discussions of art, murals, Mexico, sex, new novels, and a host of other subjects are more prominent and more informed by real knowledge than are her excursions into music. Reviewing Genevieve Taggard's book *Words for the Chisel* under the by-line "A Singing Woman," Porter begins a paragraph with the sentence "This poet has music and emotion and distinction of utterance" (*Strange, Old World* 41), but then quickly moves away from her topic. In "Orpheus in

Purgatory," from *The Days Before*, Porter invokes musical metaphors in writing about Rilke, but she does not write like a music critic; her allusions are general, romantic, and sentimental; not analytical. Her most informed essay shot through with music may well be the little-read "The Flower of Flowers," a history of the rose published in 1950, containing insightful snatches on French medieval musical history and providing a link back to her *Song-Book* of 1933.

One possible key to Porter's personal approach to music can be found, finally, in one brief paragraph of her 1949 review of Edith Sitwell's poetry titled "The Laughing Heat of the Sun." Here, Porter evokes Baroque, neoclassical composers, only to place them immediately in a romantic setting in which they do not belong:

> [Sitwell's] early poetry was, for me, associated, for all its "modern" speed and strepitation, with the old courtly music of Lully, Rameau, Purcell, Monteverdi, that I loved and do love: festival music, meant to be played in theaters, at weddings, christenings, great crystal-lighted banquets; or in the open air, in sweet-smelling gardens and the light of the full moon, with the torches waving their banners under the trees—gay music, serious great music, one can trust one's joy in it. (*Days Before* 95)

In the space of a few words, the "festival music" moves into the moonlit garden. The stately formality of French, English, and Italian baroque mutates into a moonlit setting for weddings. Porter here clearly understands her music as "instrumental" in the sense of functional, or even utilitarian. Music she loves is "meant to be played" in a particular setting; it serves as a means towards an end. Music helps in setting a scene or a mood and provides an outward trapping that appeals to the senses, but it is not granted permission to be "absolute" music, free of functionality. Porter was finally more adept at portraying music in her fiction and exercising her rhythmical sense in her poetry than she was at analyzing music or in employing it as a conscious tool of construction in her fiction. Yet to the extent that Porter's access to music was through the heart, not through the intellect, it found its way into the structure of her stories. Its presence is not always fully controlled, yet often it is emotionally insistent and demanding. To Porter, music is an intensifier of sense impressions, not a fully manipulable tool such as language. That is why music is associated with manic performance, with threat, and with death.

V: Coda / Largo

In Porter's final years, music on display again gained prominence: the spinet in her room is visually as striking as the notorious coffin. But just as the coffin was more artifact than tool, more symbol than reality, so the spinet served more of a decorative than an expressive or creative function. Just as the coffin did not eventually hold either her body or her ashes but became a curiosity—what cultural historians now call a fetish—so the spinet, and by extension Porter's musical side, remained to a large extent outward trapping. It appears certain that Porter's musical skills in playing her instrument—with only six weeks of formal instructions in mid-life—did not suffice to express the nuances of composition and tone she achieved in her prose and frequently in her poetry as well. Nonetheless, the *French Song-Book* testifies to Porter's ability to unite musical appreciation and cultural history in her creative mind. Studying Porter's relationship to music and the musical arts allows readers to see more clearly her ultimately romantic, ultimately tragic view of life. Attention to her use of music suggests also that her vaunted prose style owes as much to her ear as to her eye. In the full chord of her life, music may have been the subdominant, but the cadence would remain incomplete without it.

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