THOMAS WOLFE AND KATHERINE ANNE PORTER IN GERMANY: THE ETHICAL DIMENSION OF FICTION[1]

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> But Wolfe came, strangely enough with high enthusiasm about Germany—many American writers are naive politically until they have some personal experience with Fascism and oppression.
>
> Martha Dodd, *Through Embassy Eyes* [2]

> I am Anti-Nazi and have been since I was in Germany ten years ago and saw the beginnings of that party in power.
>
> Katherine Anne Porter to Freda Kirchwey, Feb. 5, 1942[3]

The role of Germany in Thomas Wolfe's development as a writer and a social observer has recently received widespread, if intermittent, attention. In a brief section entitled "Epiphany" at the end of his remarks about Wolfe's attitudes toward Germany, Frank Wilson gestures towards the growth as a human being Wolfe experienced in Germany:

> [T]he physical and psychical impacts of Germany profoundly influenced the content of Thomas Wolfe's work and . . . [moved him] from preoccupation with self into the brotherhood of man. (7)

The growth of Wolfe's social consciousness and the catalytic effect of experiencing Nazi Germany emerge more clearly in a comparison with Katherine Anne Porter who, under similar conditions, developed an equally intense preoccupation with totalitarianism. Both writers openly attuned their craft to ethical concerns which had lain dormant in their earlier work. In tracing the ethical awakening of the two authors as arising from political observation, I have in mind a basically Aristotelian distinction between politics as intellectual virtue (a potentiality) and the narrower ethics as moral virtue (an actuality).

Thomas Wolfe and Katherine Anne Porter observed the phenomenon of National Socialism in Germany in the 1930s; Wolfe during several trips—most notably in 1935 and 1936—and Porter during the winter of 1931/32, when she lived in Berlin and the Nazis were still some months away from coming to power. Both writers almost immediately adjusted the focus of their work from social chronicle to engaged advocacy. Their fresh political awareness found its expression in ethically reflected statements that took on urgency and zeal. The ethical awakening Wolfe and Porter experienced during their German sojourns would profoundly influence their writing careers. The remainder of Wolfe's career was limited to the next two years; yet his writing about Germany, specifically Book VI of *You*

Can't Go Home Again (entitled "I Have a Thing to Tell You") reflects a new ethical maturity. Porter would publish *Ship of Fools* in 1962, thirty years after her original encounter with Germany, after the longest incubation period any 20th-century novel is likely to have experienced. If one is to trust Porter's frequent pronouncements on totalitarianism, during and after the war, her German experiences reverberate right up to her publication of *The Never-Ending Wrong* in 1977 and to her death in 1980.

Critics largely agree on the personal and ideological significance of Wolfe's later trips to Germany. William Pusey and Leslie Field have discussed "The German Vogue of Thomas Wolfe" and the matter of Wolfe and the Jews, respectively.[4] In the pages of this journal, Richard Kane, Klaus Lanzinger, and John Idol have illuminated various aspects of Wolfe's longing for Europe. Kane reminds us that Wolfe admired the form and structure of German life. Lanzinger places Wolfe's 1924 visit in a Paris in which Hemingway was about to write *The Sun Also Rises*, emphasizing the twenties rather than the thirties as Wolfe's formative decade.[5] John Idol has traced the Dark Helen motif through Wolfe's German writings. All of these critics have helped document Wolfe's political awakening to the realities of an increasingly totalitarian Germany during the mid-1930s. A specifically ethical reaction arising from political observation remains to be articulated. Yet, barred from direct political activity in Germany, Wolfe and Porter both sought to emphasize the plight of human beings under the new regime, with Wolfe calling for indulgent judgment of the German people while indicting the fascist political system.

I wish to bring the example of Katherine Anne Porter into the discussion because I believe that a look at Porter's and Wolfe's surprisingly similar experiences will help us see a pattern in the political growth of American writers abroad that we neglected to date. Two aspects seem to me of particular interest; one concerns the connections between Wolfe's and Porter's literary works and the prevalence of certain critical schools, the other the limitations of aesthetic works of art in a political context. These two questions are contingent and can be rephrased in this manner: What degree of aesthetic relevance can a politically motivated work lay claim to and how does a certain critical approach predispose a reader's judgment of literary quality? Let us keep in mind that Wolfe and Porter wrote their observations about Germany in the thirties—the time when the so-called "New Criticism" began to germinate. Its tenets, particularly ideas such as the "verbal icon," the idea that a poem or generally a work of art exists in a contextual vacuum and refers most centrally to itself, would preclude writers from making political commentary a central preoccupation of their work. I hypothesize that Porter and Wolfe did indeed make such political commentary in their writing but were not fully recognized because of their audiences' "horizon of expectation."[6]

Almost exactly a generation after Wolfe's visits to Germany, Richard S. Kennedy most articulately expressed a political dimension in Wolfe's

work, yet by this time the New Criticism was slowly being replaced by politically interested (and sometimes partisan) evaluations. The sixties, after all, was the time when the Frankfurt School gained literary cachet. In his 1962 book whose title invokes the well-worn new critical metaphor of the "House of Fiction," *The Window of Memory: The Literary Career of Thomas Wolfe,* Kennedy postulates the following about Wolfe's "Political Awakening":

> . . . his life and his writing were to show not only further extension of his social sympathies but also his realization that politics is just a more complex form of ethics. (325)

The phrasing, "politics is just a more complex form of ethics," is a bit unfortunate, but the insight is provocative. Ethics and politics, Kennedy suggests, are interchangeable terms which may serve to describe a writer's aspiration to do more than chronicle in rhapsodic tones a time which is "O lost, and by the wind grieved." Let me modify Kennedy's assessment to state that Wolfe realized the need to infuse political ethics into his aesthetic work that had been heretofore almost exclusively preoccupied with social relationships. The America that Wolfe portrayed in his early novels and that shaped his youth was, even in the throes of the Depression, still a quintessentially conservative country. One of the primary tenets of conservatism is the depoliticization of private life. It took exposure to European fascism for Wolfe - and also for Porter - to realize the political efficacy of their writing; to realize, in other words, their potential as ethical agents.

Note again the title of Kennedy's 1962 book: *The Window of Memory.* Porter scholars would likely agree that this is the perfect title for a critical study of Porter. Katherine Anne, after all, not only reflected on her memory, but also refracted her memory to fashion for herself a genteel Southern past she never had. Now Porter took about thirty years, an entire generation's worth of literary history, to complete *Ship of Fools.* Is it coincidental that Richard Kennedy wrote his remarks about Wolfe's political awakening—which apparently have never again been discussed in quite this manner—in 1962, the publication year of Porter's novel? Does it stand to reason that ethics and politics were in the forefront of the public's mind in the time immediately following the building of the Berlin wall (1961) and the Cuban missile crisis (1962)? If we can trust one of the most astute chroniclers of the time, the confessional and by then overtly political poet Robert Lowell, politics and sheer survival were grave concerns of public debate. Lowell titled one of his most terrifying poems "Fall 1961":

> All autumn, the chafe and jar
> of nuclear war;
> we have talked our extinction to death.
> I swim like a minnow
> behind my studio window.
> . . .

In 1997, more than a generation after Mr. Kennedy's words, the political dimension in Wolfe's work is well worth reevaluating. I believe that our position in historical time as well as our position in literary history may help in performing such a reevaluation.

The approaching ends of both the century and the millennium have made clear to most human beings that we live in a small world and that ethics and politics are closely intertwined. Our concern for the global environment is but one example of the way in which ethical considerations enter into political decisions. In terms of literary history, we have come full circle from the uncontested reign of New Criticism to its debunking by Postmodernism to its slow mutation into the New Historicism. Readers have been newly sensitized to the function of writers as ethical agents by current critical preoccupations with concepts such as historicity and contingency.

By placing Wolfe and Porter next to each other, we see at once what unites them and at the same time distinguishes them from other European travelers. The expatriates of the teens and twenties—Pound, Frost, Stein, Hemingway and friends—went to Europe for cultural growth and increasing sophistication. The members of the "lost generation," in Gertrude Stein's phrase, did lose a part of their youth and a part of their American identity as well, but they won literary fame and helped transform American literature by producing a large body of Modernist works.

Yet it would be short-sighted to evaluate Thomas Wolfe and Katherine Anne Porter either as culture-seeking modernists or as elegists of European culture 13. They are writers of the thirties, and as members of that particular decade they need to be evaluated under different parameters than either their twenties predecessors or their post-WW II colleagues such as Richard Wright and James Baldwin.

Both Wolfe and Porter are praised, and rightly so, for their portrayal of *American* culture, not of European culture. Compare, if you will, Ernest Hemingway: we acknowledge him as the supreme chronicler of the Spanish bullfight and the series of Parisian parties known euphemistically as the Moveable Feast. Few readers think of Ezra Pound as an Idahoan, but we do think of Wolfe as a North Carolinian. We do think of Porter as a Southerner or, more exactly, a native Texan with a fictitious genteel background. In short, both are first and foremost Americans in their identity and in their literary themes. Their position in time—members of the thirties generation—surely has something to do with this. They were in Germany thirteen to eighteen years after the end of the war (The Great War, that is), during the depression years when the Depression raged in America. More significant, however, is the peculiar political scenery that they had to confront. They did not come to Germany to study fascism. Rather, they encountered it somewhat to their surprise, were dumbfounded at first, and then started responding with the professional means at their disposal:

they wrote. In the process of this writing, they found occasion to redefine and refine their American political identity that heretofore they had taken more or less for granted. Because they are rightly revered as *American* writers, they reacted as Americans: politically naive perhaps, but ethically sensitive.

Consider these parallels: Porter came to Germany in the fall of 1931 and stayed through the winter. Her experiences abroad had been limited to several lengthy stays in Mexico where, however, she had politically and emotionally entangled herself. Her writings about Germany, most notably her story "The Leaning Tower" and her poem "After A Long Journey," are thinly veiled autobiographical accounts of a sensitive American confronting the harsh realities of an increasingly totalitarian environment made harsher by the onset of winter.[7] In a key episode, Porter's character Charles Upton perceives with hallucinatory quality the citizens of Berlin as an assembly of pigs. Porter uses the rhetorical means of *evidentia* here, and it is worth quoting a lengthy passage:

> He had watched a group of middle-aged men and women who were gathered in silence before two adjoining windows, gazing silently at displays of toy pigs and sugar pigs. Nearly all of [these persons] were leading their slender, overbred, short-legged dogs in pairs on fancy leashes. The dogs wore their winter clothes: wool sweaters, fur ruffs, and fleece-lined rubber boots. The creatures whined and complained and shivered, and their owners lifted them up tenderly to show them the pigs.
>
> 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. (195)

It is a long way from disliking people and comparing them to pigs to developing a reflected antifascist attitude. Yet the responses of Porter's character Charles Upton and Wolfe's narrator George Webber bear striking similarities. Recall the episode described by Ledig-Rowohlt in his *American Scholar* article in 1953: Wolfe had been interviewed by a Berlin newspaper, and an attractive, large blonde woman had sketched him. The published sketch infuriated Wolfe; Rowohlt reports that Wolfe asked him in German "Habe ich ein Schweinsgesicht?" (195). [Do I have a pig's face?][8]

The episode at the center of "Oktoberfest" similarly dwells on pigs

and uncontrolled eating. Yet a series of quotations from pertinent texts suggests a maturing of the narrator based on observation and reflection. The narrator's original attitude conveys adult judgment of innocent children:

> Great sausages hung in ropes and festoons from the walls of some of these places. . .
>
> The feeders, it seemed to me, were for the most part great heavy people who already had in their faces something of the bloated contentment of swine. Their eyes were dulled and bleared with food and beer. . . . (*Stories* 310-11)

Very quickly, after some imbibing, the attitude changes to reflection and then fear:

> I understood now why other nations feared them so; suddenly I was myself seized with a deadly fear of them that froze my heart. (311)

I could now quote from either the story "The Dark Messiah" or from the so-called "Spanish Letter" to mark the final point in the transition. Note how studiously Wolfe avoids calling this a political judgment, though. He is very careful with his terms. After his German friends have displayed their paranoia to him, George has the following insight:

> George began to realize now the tragedy that lay behind such things. There was *nothing political* in any of it. The roots of it were much more sinister and deep and evil than politics or even racial prejudice could ever be . . . What George began to see was a picture of a great people who had been *psychically wounded* and were now desperately ill with some dread *malady of the soul.* Here was an entire nation, he now realized, that was infested with the contagion of an ever-present fear. It was a kind of creeping paralysis which twisted and blighted all human relations. The pressures of a constant and infamous compulsion had silenced this whole people into a sweltering and malignant secrecy until they had become *spiritually septic* with the distillations of their own self-poisons, for which now there was no medicine or release. (*Stories* 463 emphasis added)

Note the key words in this passage: "nothing political," "psychically wounded," "malady of the soul," "spiritually septic." This is not political analysis; it is ethical judgment. In the passage quoted above, Wolfe himself provides the critic with the terms needed to describe the ethical awakening I postulate in my title.

It would therefore be incomplete to suggest that Wolfe and Porter had political awakenings in Germany. They did, and these awakenings were the necessary precondition for the next stage in their developments as writers. Wolfe and Porter recognized the ethical possibilities of prose. Whether it required the German penchant for pigs to bring this out is another matter altogether.

Fortunately, Wolfe wrote down his new ethical insights before his final, fatal illness. Fortunately, Porter was given another thirty years to fight

her writer's block and eventually complete *Ship of Fools* into the novel it became. As Richard Kennedy's critique suggests, the literary world of 1962 was ready to receive politically mature writing. What it may have taken thirty more years to appreciate is the true ethical dimension underlying the political subject matter.

I propose, therefore, that both writers matured from an aesthetic reaction to Germany to a reflected political reaction. Wolfe's "I Have a Thing to Tell You" is a deeply ethical response to his last visit to Germany. Its art has been put to the service of humanitarian values. Ledig-Rowohlt's report illustrates Wolfe's willingness to forego his outstanding reputation in Germany in order to be free:

> I talked insistently to Wolfe, trying to encourage him to write a great novel by which he as a writer, not as a political propagandist, should appeal to the conscience of mankind. He smiled: just because he loved mankind above everything else, he would be obliged to be political in such a book. (Ledig-Rowohlt 196)

Both Wolfe and Porter, then, moved through aesthetics to ethics. It particularly intrigues me that both of these American writers had their transforming experiences in reaction to Germany. I do not want to overuse the cliché of the "innocent abroad." But Martha Dodd's impression about the political naivete of American writers, curable only through direct exposure to Fascism, quoted the outset of this paper, may experience a belated justification.

The same learning process applies to Porter. Critics disagree to this day on the literary merits of *Ship of Fools.* I suggest that the book has baffled critics because it does not consistently exhibit Porter's familiar, highly symbolic craft. It takes its shape as a political meditation and a satire because Porter wished above all to make an ethical statement.[9]

What, then, is an ethical dimension in writing? We reach a preliminary definition through the comparison of Wolfe and Porter in Germany: Ethics emerges in the writing of fiction when the aesthetic dimension of the work of art is put in the service of a political action. Political awareness coupled with high art engenders ethics.

NOTES

[1] I wish to thank Professor Joseph Flora of the University of North Carolina for his friendship and professional encouragement.

[2] See Martha Dodd's *Through Embassy Eyes.*

[3] Quoted by Janis Stout in *Katherine Anne Porter: A Sense of the Times* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 1995) on page 93.

[4] William W. Pussey III, "The German Vogue of Thomas Wolfe," *The Germanic Review* 23:2 (1948): 131-48; Leslie Field, "Thomas Wolfe's Attitudes Toward Germany and the Jews," *Journal of Modern Literature* 11 (1984): 180-85; Leslie Field, "*You Can't Go Home Again:* Wolfe's Germany and Social Consciousness," *Critical Essays on Thomas Wolfe,* ed. John Phillipson (Boston: GK Hall, 1985), 99-112.

[5] See Klaus Lanzinger's "Jason's Voyage: The International Theme of Thomas Wolfe" in *The Thomas Wolfe Review* 16.2 (1992): 35. Wolfe's early visits to Europe coincided with the post WW I craze of the early 1920s, but Wolfe appears to not to have aligned himself with the "lost generation." Also see Wilson, page 1.

[6] I first encountered the term "Erwartungshorizont" in the writings of Wolfgang Iser.

[7] See Thomas Austenfeld's "Katherine Anne Porter Abroad: The Politics of Emotion" in *Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 27.1 (1994): 27-33.

[8] For more information on the sketch artist, see Steven B. Rogers' "'She Looked Like One of the Valkyries': Who Was Thomas Wolfe's German Girlfriend?" in *The Thomas Wolfe Review* 21.1 (1997): 8-20.

[8] For a dissenting opinion, see Robert H. Brinkmeyer, who considers the novel seriously marred in *Katherine Anne Porter's Artistic Development: Primitivism, Traditionalism, and Totalitarianism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993).

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