

**THE COLLECTED ESSAYS AND
OCCASIONAL WRITINGS OF
KATHERINE ANNE PORTER**

Delacorte, 496 pp., \$12.50

"WHAT I ALWAYS HOPED for myself was that I might keep a warm heart and cultivate a cool head," wrote Katherine Anne Porter to a friend in 1953, thereby concluding on a high note a verbal skirmish that produced some rather low blows from both parties. Clearly, the life of the mind is not without its gut reactions.

Beginning as a dispute about Gertrude Stein's prose, the quarrel in question strayed into such personal abuse that readers may wonder at the inclusion of these letters in a volume dignified by the title *Collected Essays*. During the volley Miss Porter exposed the folly of so many pious hopes. Not warm heart and cool head, but cool heart and warm head, marked both sides of this particular debate.

Yet the cited line does provide a useful key to Miss Porter's too human aspiration, as well as to the problem that faces all artists. Without cool control, passion produces chaos rather than art. Without warmth, intellect can neither don nor dent flesh. Only when the two elements of creation are somehow balanced can the miracle which we call art result.

Such balance is notably hard to achieve, in life or in books. Long a theme in Western literature, the conflict between instinct and intelligence became a theme of Miss Porter's late-blooming novel, *Ship of Fools*, incarnated in the persons of La Condesa and Mrs. Treadway. The countess, eroded by emotional excesses, had lost everything but craving; while Mrs. Treadway, the embodiment of "silence, seclusion . . . and her own thoughts," exploded at last in violent negation.

Taken together, these women represent in *extremis* the polarities of Miss Porter's own nature as revealed in her "occasional" writing. When extremes like these can be balanced, they produce—as in her best work—the intensity and insight of great literature. When they slip out of balance, they can produce banal enthusiasms on the one hand, defensive bitterness on the other.

More than once in these pages Miss Porter asserts what literature so often represents: "life is one bloody, horrible confusion." The dimension of greatness in art results from the distancing of such strong feelings—what Wordsworth defined as emotion recollected in tranquillity, and Eliot, as finding the objective correlative. When, chiefly in her short stories, Miss Porter achieves

this separation from her own suffering, she has fully transacted what she calls in one essay "the business of the artist." That business is to know chaos, "admit it, and manifest his vision of order in the human imagination."

Vision of this order does not, apparently, accompany every act of perception. Consequently, those persons of huge potential for both thought and feeling must suffer even more keenly the tension of warring elements within the self. In everyday affairs, from which no genius is exempt, such capacity for feeling may emerge as a sense of martyrdom. Writing ostensibly of Ezra Pound, for example, Miss Porter does not quite succeed in objectifying her resentment of "a world of the deaf, dumb, and blind, of nitwits, numbskulls, and outright villains."

Those villains assume more definite form in her comment to her nephew soon after the National Book Award of 1963 went to another writer: "Too many people who have resented me for years are getting into the act . . . the kind of people who hate my writing, and my reputation, are joined by the people who hate my having that money—it makes quite a mob."

Such defensive outbursts explain if

they do not fully justify the harsh admonition of Donald Sutherland, her adversary in the quarrelsome letters mentioned above. In one of them he charges that "the feminine mind lives and breathes in the personal and the sensory and when you go on the attack . . . you come out with the substance and texture of gossip . . . so that there has never been a woman critic and . . . never will be."

Nothing appears to anger Miss Porter more than pronouncements about what a woman could or should not do. Her severest strictures against D. H. Lawrence, for example, are provoked by his conception of "a female partner who is nothing but one yielding, faceless, voiceless organ of consent." Doubtless, neo-Freudian critics of the future will take due note of this and similar responses. At present, one need but note her tart reply to Sutherland's charge: ". . . opinionated people don't hold much with other people's opinions, and it is a great pleasure to some of them to be able to ascribe incurable defects, such as belonging to a certain sex . . . to anyone whose views they disagree with."

Here Miss Porter must be judged winner of the round. Sutherland's fal-

Your Literary I. Q.

Conducted by David M. Glixon

A DIRTY DOZEN

With which character in literature, mythology, or real life are these grisly events connected? Edgar A. Shoaff of La Cañada, Calif., who asks the question, provides the solution on page 32.

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| 1. Thyestes () | A. She allegedly murders her stepmother and father with an axe. |
| 2. Tamora () | B. The soldier he kills in a combat turns out to be his son. |
| 3. Jason () | C. Spurned by a gypsy dancer, he brings about her execution and is killed by an avenging cripple. |
| 4. Sue Bridehead () | D. He involuntarily causes the murder of his young brother, his best friend, his bride, and himself. |
| 5. Gertrude () | E. She unknowingly marries her son, who has unknowingly killed her husband, his father. |
| 6. Rustum () | F. In a fit of jealous rage, his wife murders their two children. |
| 7. Lizzie Borden () | G. At her instigation, her brother kills their mother and their mother's lover. |
| 8. Jocasta () | H. One of her three sons is killed by her captor, whose daughter is raped by her other sons; they are killed and served to her in a pie. |
| 9. Claude Frollo () | I. A stepmother's lawless passion and a father's curse cause his death at the hands of a sea monster. |
| 10. Electra () | J. At a banquet he dines on a stew of his five sons. |
| 11. Frankenstein () | K. Her husband's schemes cause her death and his own, as well as those of her first husband, her son, and the brother of the latter's sweetheart. |
| 12. Hippolytus () | L. Her foster son kills her two children and then hangs himself. |



libility is further established by the best of Miss Porter's essays, which, like her finest stories, exhibit a splendid fusion of passion and discipline, blending the lyrical and didactic impulses in a prose fabric of remarkable brilliance.

Her defense of Thomas Hardy against "the military police of orthodoxy" is a fine example of her dazzling rhetoric. Since her antagonist in this instance was T. S. Eliot, Miss Porter's fearlessness must also be noted as she hurls herself ecstatically into the attack on Eliot's dictum that Hardy was not "wholesome or edifying." "With no disrespect . . . to conventional piety," she wrote, "may I venture that in the regions of art, as of religion, edification is not the highest form of intellectual or spiritual experience. It is a happy truth that Hardy's novels are really not edifying. . . . A novel by Thomas Hardy can be a chastening experience, an appalling one . . . but the complacency of edification is absent, as it is apt to be from any true tragedy."

Similar defiance—of fashion or authority—shapes her comment on *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and on the "manly solidarity" of critics when defending D. H. Lawrence against censors. "I wish only to say that . . . he was about as wrong as can be on the whole subject of sex, and that he wrote a . . . laboriously bad book to prove it." The sound good sense of such remarks is often outweighed, however, by a note of asperity toward males which, muted though it is, recalls the angry force that led Mrs. Treadwell, in *Ship of Fools*, to beat an insensitive man with the heel of her dancing shoe in a frenzy of "furious pleasure."

There is, in fact, no blinking the undercurrent of violence that pulsates in much of Miss Porter's criticism, vitalizing her vaunted style. When defending Hardy, for example, she is really attacking Eliot; when praising Pound, she is striking out at "fat and smug" people who are "still running things." Like David, she fells Goliaths gladly. Thus, her praise of Willa Cather, although surely sincere, seems ultimately motivated by distaste for "afflicted giants of contemporary literature, and their abject camp followers."

This last pronouncement is ironic, for despite her castigation elsewhere of "thinly disguised autobiographical novels" written by some of those giants,

Miss Porter's writing is, even when most analytical, startlingly revealing of the self behind the critic. Indeed, her comment on Katherine Mansfield might well be a look into the mirror: "Mistakenly she fought in herself those very elements that combined to form her main virtue: a certain grim, quiet ruthlessness . . . an unsparing and sometimes cruel eye . . . a burning, indignant heart."

In this parallel the operative word is probably "indignant." The gold in Miss Porter's essays has been produced at white heat; her rage to live and to write, to stoke the fiery furnace of imagination burns with an angry flame that could not be sustained over long sittings without destroying the artificer. This may explain why her novel, by critical consensus, lacked the dynamism of her shorter tales; and why several longer projected works, fragments of which are here reproduced, never have been finally forged.

On the other hand, in the short probes many of her remarks achieve an aphoristic sparkle. With dry humor she points out that "Pound had a fanatical desire to force entire populations to respect art even if they did not understand it." And again, speaking of Rilke's mistresses: "Not one of them had any real right to complain, for he was faithful to them all, and he paid them the highest compliment of never confusing one of them with another."

To each of these finely honed remarks, unfortunately, the present catch-all collection matches one of shrillness or banality. Letters to editors, sometimes arch and sometimes scolding, vie with such questionable snippets of memory as that of Jacqueline Kennedy with "the most generous and innocent smile in the world." As a volume, this assortment is far too heavily burdened with writing that is, indeed, "occasional"—if that is the proper euphemism for fragments of uneven quality and of impermanent interest except to biographers yet unborn.

Surely, Miss Porter deserves better of her editors than the license to publish every ill-considered word, when so many of her passages are among the finest that sensitivity has conceived or art contrived. Like the irresistibly charming countess of her novel, Miss Porter needed to be told by a true friend: "Truth is, you are a more than ordinarily perverse sort of being." Like the candid Condesa, she would in all likelihood respond: "When will you learn not to trust me. . . .?"

Glendy Culligan

Glendy Culligan was for a number of years book review editor of the Washington Post.

Personal History

**MAX BRAND:
The Big "Westerner"**

by Robert Easton

*University of Oklahoma Press,
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NEVER WAS A MAN'S NAME MORE appropriate to his personal demons, yet it is doubtful whether any writer ever went to such extremes to hide his identity from his readers. "Max Brand" was born Frederick Schiller Faust, and from this excellent appraisal of the man and his work we learn that he was Faustian in all his drives.

Many credit him with establishing, if not inventing, the mythic Western, but few are aware that he wrote in other forms under twenty different pen names. He created the Dr. Kildare series, was involved in more than seventy motion pictures including the classic *Destry Rides Again*, and produced a number of mysteries. While he was grinding out millions of words of pulp fiction, Faust was convinced that he was only buying time to devote to his real calling. His greatest desire in life was to achieve recognition as a serious poet. He wrote long, long epic poems on classical and mythological themes. None of them was successful, but all his tormented life he thought of himself as a poet and regarded prose fiction as simply something one did to earn a living.

He so despised his published writing that he allowed no interviews or photographs. Once he told his long-suffering wife, "Daily I thank God in three languages that I write under a pen name." But write he must, for his appetites grew faster than his income, and every year there had to be more money. In one thirteen-day sprint he produced two long serials and a novelette—190,000 words, or the equivalent of three books. Often a single issue of a pulp magazine would contain three stories by Faust under three different names.

He was born in Seattle in 1892, and grew up in California's fabled San Joaquin Valley. Orphaned at thirteen, he was forced to accept whatever work he could find in order to survive. At sixteen a distant relative offered to take him in and send him to high school. Faust proved to be a brilliant if somewhat erratic student. He was voracious in his reading, and memorized some 25,000 lines of Shakespeare. He also began to write poems. In the fall of 1911 he entered the University of California at Berkeley, where he became a campus legend for his writing, his drinking, and his offer to stand in for anyone in any final examination for \$5,