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Influenza, Heritage, and Magical Realism in
Katherine Anne Porter's Miranda Stories

Katherine Snow Nelson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Emron Esplin, Chair
Trent Hickman
Keith Lawrence

Department of English
Brigham Young University

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ABSTRACT

Influenza, Heritage, and Magical Realism in Katherine Anne Porter's Miranda Stories

Katherine Snow Nelson
Department of English, BYU
Master of Arts

Despite the devastating scope of the Spanish Influenza Pandemic of 1918, curiously few references to the flu exist in literature. Katherine Anne Porter offered one of modernism's only extensive fictional treatments of the pandemic in her short novel "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," decades after her own near-death encounter with the flu. Porter was able to give voice to an experience that had traumatized others into silence by drawing on an early form of magical realism. Magical realism's ghosts—everyday presences rather than otherworldly beings to be feared—are of particular relevance to "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" since ghosts "haunt" Porter's semi-autobiographical Miranda throughout the story, acting as correctives to Miranda's (and Porter's) desire to isolate herself from the familial and regional heritage that burdens her with unwanted and often conflicting ideologies. Ultimately, in using magical realism to explore her sense of self and to articulate the alienating effects of her near-death experience, Porter is able to embrace her complicated heritage and her fractured past, reclaiming interconnectedness while maintaining her individuality.

Keywords: Katherine Anne Porter, magical realism, 1918 Influenza Pandemic, modernism

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Influenza, Heritage, and Magical Realism in
Katherine Anne Porter's Miranda Stories

Katherine Anne Porter once said, "My America has been a borderland of strange tongues and commingled races" ("Why I Write" 356). She was right. Though she was the descendent of Southern cotton plantation owners, Porter grew up in Texas ranchland. As critic Janis P. Stout explains, "Envisioning herself a child of the old order, a belle, a Southern *grande dame*, [Porter] nevertheless also envisioned herself as an advanced woman, a challenger of the past" (494–95). As she grew up and traveled through and outside of the United States, she was influenced by the cultures she saw and continually reevaluated the shape she wanted her identity to take. She vacillated between a desire to be part of the "white-pillar crowd" or to join the suffragettes, to be a socialite or a socialist ("Interview" 83). As an artist, she was never certain whether her responsibility was to create art focused on "eternal verities," art with universal appeal, or to produce propaganda-art that would further political causes such as the Mexican Revolution and women's lib. Porter faced continual difficulty in articulating these often contradictory cultural and psychic spaces to which she owed the formation of her sense of self, and she frequently felt alienated from any one particular culture.

That feeling of isolation was compounded when she nearly died in the Spanish Influenza Pandemic of 1918. At the time, Porter was working as a reporter for *The Rocky Mountain News* in Denver, Colorado. She was so close to death that "her doctors expected her to die, the newspaper drafted her obituary, and her family made arrangements for the burial" (Davis 57). She eventually stabilized and slowly recovered, though when she left the hospital she was still healing from a broken arm and phlebitis in her leg. She was also entirely bald, and when her hair finally did grow back, it was completely white. The virus also took a mental toll on Porter; she

described her near-death experience by stating, “It simply divided my life, cut across it like that. So that everything before that was just getting ready, and after that I was in some strange way altered, really. . . . Now if you have had that, and survived it, and come back from it, you are no longer like other people, and there’s no use deceiving yourself that you are” (“Interview” 85). The experience was transformative, and it left her feeling “alienated” to the point that she “took . . . a long time to go out and live in the world again” (85).

The isolating, silencing, distance-inducing trauma of the pandemic was, of course, not unique to Porter; as Catherine Belling explains, there were “pockets of mortality topping twenty-five percent,” and places like Philadelphia faced “near medieval conditions: carts to collect the dead went street to street, drivers calling out to alert stricken families of the possibility of corpse removal” (365). As Belling and Laurel Bollinger have each observed, despite the devastating scope of the calamity, the people who actually experienced the flu said curiously little about it. Bollinger notes that Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, and Willa Cather are among the few writers from the period who mention or allude to the flu at all. Bollinger accounts for this phenomenon of cultural muteness by explaining that in the face of a trauma so all-consuming and widespread, “silence must have seemed the wiser choice” (387). Belling agrees, concluding that there was something impossible about witnessing to or even articulating such a traumatic experience; those who fell victim to the flu hardly remembered the illness for all their hallucinations, and those who watched the illness ravage family, friends, and whole cities could scarcely describe the putridness of the symptoms (59).

Amidst so much reticence, Porter offered modernism’s only extensive fictional treatment of the pandemic in her short novel “Pale Horse, Pale Rider.” The story’s inception is complicated. In 1928 in Salem, Massachusetts, Porter became interested in researching her

ancestral lines, an interest that led to an idea for an autobiographical novel titled “Many Redeemers” that she had planned would comprise family anecdotes, stories from her youth, and experiences from her political involvement in Mexico. The manuscript preoccupied her for thirty years before she abandoned it entirely, though pieces of it were published in different forms—“The Old Order,” published in *The Leaning Tower and Other Stories* in 1944, as well as “Old Mortality” and “Pale Horse, Pale Rider,” which were published in 1939.

The idea for “Pale Horse, Pale Rider,” in particular, arose from her time in Basel, Switzerland, in 1932, when she began to reflect on her time in Denver. As Darlene Harbour Unrue explains, “In this distant European city she was looking more intently than she ever had into her own past, her family history, and her native region” (145). In reflecting on her near-death experience, she confronted some of the ways the weight of her family legacy had defined her—something that seemed to her at the time to be problematic. Given that Porter’s past was burdened with the same trauma affecting the rest of the world, many critics have wondered how she alone was able to give voice to her experience with the flu. Others have examined how her unique aesthetic grew out of a particular familial, regional, or national influence. Scholars’ conclusions about the unique form of her prose vary. Bollinger, for instance, argues that Porter drew on the apocalyptic genre she became familiar with in Basel to try to give meaning to an experience so apparently random and ruthless (374, 379). Belling suggests that Porter presents Miranda’s fevers as a surrealist form new to modernism that is able to give language to the trauma of the flu because it allows focus on subjective and internal experience (64). Both critics are partly right, but both believe that the apocalyptic and surrealist forms fail in some way to create meaning from the experience, despite the fact that Porter’s efforts instead seem to have been successful.

I argue that Porter drew on a form not yet named—she united realism with the supernatural in an early form of magical realism. Magical realism, as Amaryll Beatrice Chanady has argued in her book *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved Versus Unresolved Antinomy*, allows for two codes of reality—the rational and the supernatural—to exist simultaneously (8). Phenomena belonging to the supernatural sphere—such as lifelike dreams, fluctuations in time, and the appearance of ghosts—are treated matter-of-factly, without surprise, shock, or awe. Ghosts are of particular relevance to “Pale Horse, Pale Rider,” since they “haunt” Miranda throughout the story. Magical realism treats ghosts differently compared to the standard ghost story in which characters and/or narrators fear, dismiss, or logically explain away the supernatural phenomena. Magical realist texts present ghosts not as otherworldly beings to be feared but as everyday presences whose influence on the living is not worth any special attention. Ghosts in magical realism, as Lois Parkinson Zamora notes in “Magical Romance/Magical Realism: Ghosts in U.S. and Latin American Fiction,” “often act as correctives to the insularities of individuality, as links to lost families and communities, or as reminders of communal crimes, crises, cruelties. They may suggest displacement and alienation or, alternatively, reunion and communion” (497).

The ghostly figures in “Pale Horse, Pale Rider” demonstrate this duality when the narrative forces Miranda to confront the instability of human relationships in the face of ever-present death. Porter’s time in Mexico, where she first experienced the ubiquity of death, helped her develop the magic realist structure she needed to speak of the destabilizing omnipresence of death during the flu pandemic.

In presenting her near-death experience in a magical realist framework, Porter was not only able to make the experience meaningful, she was also able to confront the normative

ideologies of her upbringing, embracing the interconnectivity of her heritage while simultaneously preserving her unique sense of self as an artist. Miranda's passage from childhood to adulthood through "The Old Order" and "Old Mortality" mirrors Porter's own paradigmatic evolution. Miranda's resistance to Southern gentility and its peculiar valuations of femininity begins in the first two stories and comes to a head in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," culminating in a near-death experience in which ghosts—beings that inhabit both the world of the living and the world of the dead—show her the dangers of, as Kolmar puts it, "separation, self-involvement, isolation" that mean "an abandonment of the double or multiple vision, for a perspective that is monofocal, for a life that is locked into one plane of experience" (243). These ghosts also remind her of the necessity of multiple perspectives in shaping a cohesive and fully actualized sense of self.

Magical Realism and Porter's time in Mexico

Porter spent much of her early life in areas rife with Mexican-American culture, and she felt close ties to Mexican culture; indeed, she described Mexico as her "familiar country" ("Why I Write" 355). Porter's Indian Creek was near enough to the U.S.-Mexico border for her to have been cognizant of the distinctive Mexican-American culture there. Later, her family lived in San Antonio for a time, which had been considered a U.S.—and not a Mexican—city for only sixty years by the time her family lived there (Stout 496). Porter felt that "it was because San Antonio was such a Mexican city that she felt at home when she later went to Mexico as an adult" (496), but she almost certainly also felt comfortable because while living in San Antonio she often crossed the border into Mexico (Unrue 70). However, Porter was not only familiar with the border; she also lived and worked in Mexico proper during some of the country's most tumultuous, war-torn years, and her experiences there offered her alternative, more supernatural,

conceptions of death and time. As Emron Esplin explains, she became preoccupied with time and death during the Obregón Revolution (28). The violence of the revolution shocked her. Unrue explains, “By the time the train [taking her from the U.S. to Mexico] had pulled into . . . Mexico City on 6 November [1920], she had seen the ruins of buildings leveled by cannon fire and haciendas burned by angry peons. On crumbling walls that bore evidence of bullet fusillade she had seen painted slogans: ‘Viva la Revolucion!’ ‘Muerta a la Tirania!’” (73). Porter’s sense of the nearness of death and the instability of time are evident in a fragment of fiction Porter recorded in her diary:

Now between one minute and another everything is changing . . . nothing can be again as it was . . . [L]et me begin again to live in the present . . . I am counting the days, and I weep for what I have [lost], and I am afraid of the time coming when I must explain my failures and my sins to one, who is both judge and executioner, who will not listen. . . . What cure is there for the wounds I have given and received, what pardon? Let me face it now. (qtd. in Unrue 86–87)

Unrue explains that “another note reads only, ‘I have set my sails for death’” (87). Although Unrue attributes these fragments to Porter’s depression and fear regarding the abortion she received in Mexico in 1921, Porter’s complicated feelings were certainly also bound up with her understanding of the instability of death and time that had deepened during her involvement in the Mexican Revolution. Regardless, the fragment displays a certain regard for supernatural notions of death and time; that is, it seems to embrace a religious conception of the afterlife. This is not to say, of course, that Porter had never before thought religiously, but the tragedies

surrounding her in Mexico gave her the opportunity to consider seriously a supernatural point-of-view.

Porter transmits her preoccupations with death and time into “Pale Horse, Pale Rider” via magical realism, wherein certain supernatural portrayals of death and time are standard tropes. As Chanady explains, magical realism proposes two codes of reality, the rational and the supernatural, and then allows those “antinimious” worldviews to exist simultaneously, without explaining away the supernatural elements in rational terms, which would leave the supernatural once again subsumed beneath tyrannical rationality (21–24). Because magical realist texts refuse to show that one code of reality is “more real” than the other, supernatural presentations of death and time exist easily alongside more “logical” events. As Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris note in their introduction to the comprehensive *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, “Texts labeled magical realist draw upon cultural systems that are no less ‘real’ than those upon which traditional literary realism draws—often non-Western cultural systems that privilege mystery over empiricism, empathy over technology, tradition over innovation” (3). In a magical realist text, the narrator and characters, as Esplin explains, “consider supernatural events—specifically communication with the dead or with death personified—as part of their reality. The characters accept the dead’s capability to communicate with them, and they willingly participate in the conversation” (27). Instead of treating death as a final destination from which there is no return and beyond which there is no communication, narrators and characters accept visitations from the dead or from death personified as quotidian events.

Similarly, magical realist texts present time not as a linear and logical progression of events, as the Western paradigm insists.¹ Instead, as critic Angel Flores explains in “Magical

¹ Here I use “Western” not to refer to a region of the U.S., but as a descriptor for cultures heavily influenced by the Enlightenment.

Realism in Spanish America,” “From the very first line the reader is thrown into a timeless flux and/or the unconceivable, freighted with dramatic suspense” (114). Whether such temporal fluctuations take the form of leaps ahead in time, gaps in time, or complete stoppages in time, both the characters and the narrator of a magical realist text accept “distortions of time as normal, logical parts of their lives” (Esplin 28). Magical realism turns the most foundational facts of the rational Western worldview—the irreversibility of death and the immutability of time—on their heads. In other words, as Flores notes, magical realism transforms “the common and the everyday into the awesome and the unreal” (114). Although a Western reader might question the validity of the supernatural treatment of death or time in magical realist texts, neither the narrator nor the characters give any indication that the supernatural occurrences are anything out of the ordinary.

Despite Porter’s use of these magical realist tropes in “Pale Horse, Pale Rider,” some might insist that the text be disqualified as a magical realist artifact because of its 1939 publication date, which places it squarely within the realm of modernism, as many of Porter’s texts characteristically are, and as magical realism is characteristically not. Three qualifications help allay this concern. First, Flores puts the start date of the “new phase of Latin American literature, magical realism” (qtd. in Esplin 37) at 1935, four years before the publication of “Pale Horse, Pale Rider.” But even if we are unwilling to categorize Porter’s text as part of Flores’s “new phase of Latin American literature,” considering magical realism as a mode rather than a genre might allow us to better assess its relation to other magical realist texts. Critics like Chanady argue that considering magical realism as a genre requires that we situate a magical realist text in a specific region and time period (e.g. mid to late twentieth-century Latin American literature). Considering magical realism as a mode, however, enables critics to cross

historical and geographical boundaries when applying the designation to a text and thereby discuss that text in relation to many cultures and time periods. Theorized as a mode, therefore, magical realism can include, as Zamora and Farris argue, texts like *Don Quixote*, the *Decameron*, and *The Thousand and One Nights* (2). Finally, as I will address further, “Pale Horse, Pale Rider” is an outlier of Porter’s otherwise characteristically modernist fiction, and it wrestles with a different set of themes than the texts of her contemporaries, for while her contemporaries sought to give voice to marginalized cultures and thereby perhaps only reverse the hierarchy between non-dominant and dominant cultures, Porter sought to equalize them. The mode of magical realism merely enables such an ambition.

Furthermore, the appearance of supernatural elements is not, of course, enough to say with certainty that a text is a work of magical realism. Ghost stories were a popular genre among modernist writers. However, the kind of ghost stories Porter’s contemporaries were writing—and even the kind of ghost story Porter herself wrote elsewhere—differs qualitatively from the ghosts present in “Pale Horse, Pale Rider.” In a collection titled *Haunting the House of Fiction: Feminist Perspectives on Ghost Stories by American Women*, editors Lynette Carpenter and Wendy K. Kolmar explore the unifying characteristics of ghost stories by American women throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In their introduction, they explain that one characteristic of most ghost stories of the period was dualism, “‘debates’ between reason and unreason, science and spirituality, conscious and unconscious, or natural and supernatural” (11). However, as Carpenter and Kolmar explain, “Such dualistic thinking, an approach to the supernatural that seeks to confirm one side of the dichotomy by wholly denying the other, is not characteristic” of the unusual ghost stories they investigate in their collection (11–12). Instead, the writers in their collection “seem more likely to portray natural and supernatural experience

along a continuum. Boundaries between the two are not absolute but fluid, so that the supernatural can be accepted, connected with, reclaimed, and can often possess a quality of familiarity” (12).²

But Porter’s ghosts differ from those of both types of writers, for hers do not, as Carpenter and Kolmar explain of her fellow modernists, deliver messages that “warn of the dangers of domesticity, frequently through connections between the ghost’s history and that of the living woman” (14). Her ghosts have much more in common with later writers like Sandra Cisneros and Louise Erdrich. In the last essay of the collection, Kolmar explains that the novels of these later writers “are not ‘ghost stories’ in quite the same way as other stories discussed in this collection; an encounter between the story’s protagonist and a ghost is not the central or even a central part of the their plot” (238). In fact, the mode Kolmar describes these writers engaging (though she does not name it) is a magical realist one. As Kolmar explains, these later writers are inheritors of the house ghosts of modernism, though in large part they owe such depictions of easy acceptance of the supernatural to their roots in minority cultures.³ Such writers share the magical realist impulse to, as Zamora and Faris put it, “recuperate non-Western cultural modes and nonliterary forms” (3). Kolmar also asserts that such writers engage “‘a dialectic of connectedness.’ Each text proposes interconnection—between beings, between times—as the critical mode of organization—of human life and of narrative” (243). Conversely, Kolmar says, in these texts “separation, self-involvement, isolation are problematic denials of connection. They mean an abandonment of the double or multiple vision crucial to the novel, for a perspective that is monofocal, for a life that is locked into one plan of experience” (243). It is just

² Carpenter and Kolmar argue that the former kind of ghost story was favored almost exclusively by men, while the latter were particularly valued by women.

³ In addition to Cisneros and Erdrich, Kolmar also examines Toni Cade Bambara and Judy Grahn.

such a dialectic that magical realist texts engage, for, as Zamora and Faris explain, magical realism's "primary narrative investment may be in . . . [collective] practices that bind communities together" (3). Consequently, Porter's magical realist ghosts in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" anticipate the later postmodern project to investigate inherently irreconcilable paradigms or acknowledge a multiplicity of viable ideological perspectives.

Miranda's Crisis

Irreconcilable ideological perspectives are precisely the issue in Miranda's narrative. In the first two installments of her history, "The Old Order" and "Old Mortality," Miranda confronts the familial and regional heritage which burdens her with unwanted and often conflicting ideologies. Miranda is, in many ways, semi-autobiographical, not least because she and Porter share similar feelings about their heritages. As Porter once explained, "We were brought up with a sense of our own history. . . . I felt a little suffocated and frightened [by it]. I felt a little trapped" ("Interview" 81–82). In response to her feelings of entrapment, Miranda, like Porter, physically and emotionally escapes her family and the crushing burden of heritage by fleeing to Denver, at which point "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" picks up the thread of the narrative. Although "The Old Order" and "Old Mortality" do not include magical realist elements, they are significant to our discussion because they establish the burden of community that Miranda is later forced to come to terms with when she faces death in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider."

One of Porter's and Miranda's many commonalities is their background. Like Porter, Miranda was raised near the area of Kyle, Texas, where, after Porter's mother died in childbirth, Porter's father took Porter's family to live with her grandmother (the original Catherine Anne from whom Katherine Anne later took her name). Kyle occupies the 98th parallel, "the precise border zone between South and Southwest, the strip of merger and differentiation" (Stout 498).

On one side of the 97th parallel, the environment matches that of the Deep South—a heavily wooded cotton culture. On the opposite side of the parallel lies the West—dry and barren, perfectly suited for cattle ranching.

Because “place and family, were indeed, in [Porter’s] mind, essentially one” (Stout 495), the ideologies of each culture permeate the area of the real and fictional Kyle and are reflected in Miranda’s familial structure. While the Southern culture in Miranda’s world, as in Porter’s world, seems, as Andrea K. Frankwitz explains, to privilege “the masculine over the feminine, and [to champion] the idea that men and women have fixed places and roles in society” (474), the West seems to be for Miranda, as for Porter, a land of rebellion and potential where a woman might break with the strictures of her past and forge her own future. “The Old Order” and “Old Mortality” depict Miranda wrestling against her family’s inflexible conceptions of gender and grappling with what she sees as her female relatives’ problematic rejection of such rigid gender roles. As she struggles to cultivate her own idea of how she should behave as a woman, she comes to wish that she could dissolve her allegiances to her family, eliminating the influence of their multiple ideologies in order to live according to her own desires and not according to their prescribed—and gendered—codes of behavior.

As Frankwitz observes, “Miranda’s first encounter with cultural ideologies of gender comes through her grandmother, who signifies a passive acceptance of the patriarchal order” (474). Miranda’s grandmother, Sophia Jane, is raised in the South. Growing up, Sophia Jane treasures her virginity, knowing that, for a woman in her Southern culture, chastity is “her sole claim to regard, consideration, even to existence” (“Old Order” 335). She is not unaware of the restrictiveness of her feminine position. She wonders about the experiences Stephen, her cousin and future husband, as a male, is privy to: “Ah, the delicious, the free, the wonderful, the

mysterious and terrible life of men!” (335). But her awareness only makes her passive acceptance of the patriarchal system all the more terrible, since despite feeling “that she could have managed her affairs profitably” (337), she nevertheless passively submits to her husband’s gambling away her dowry and their property. She accepts “without protest” the Southern dictum that “it was the business of a man to make all decisions and dispose of all financial matters” (337).

Even after Sophia Jane moves her family west to Texas (following the death of her husband) and is forced to take on masculine responsibilities, she still does not shuck off the Southern demand that she privilege those masculine responsibilities over feminine ones. “She had built a house large enough to shelter them all, of hand-sawed lumber dragged by ox-cart for forty miles, she had got the fields fenced in and the crops planted, she had, she believed, fed and clothed her children; and now she realized they were hungry” (“Old Order” 339). Though at first glance she appears to soften her heritage’s gendered division of labor by doing a man’s work, she neglects the traditionally feminine duties of nurturing and feeding of her children in order to perform the more “important” masculine duties of sheltering and providing for them.

Her move west and her subsequent performance of masculine duties do nothing to increase her opinion of those Western women who ignore gendered codes of behavior. When she meets her son’s Western fiancée, she becomes “deeply annoyed at seeing how self-possessed the bride had been, how she had had her way about the wedding arrangements down to the last detail, how she had glanced now and then at her new husband with calm, humorous, level eyes, as if she had already got him sized up” (“Old Order” 333). This fiancée represents to Sophia Jane not only everything that is wrong with the culture of the West, but everything that is going wrong with women’s suffrage and the future of femininity. Her objections to the fiancée are not only

that she is “altogether too Western” but also “too modern, something like the ‘new’ woman who was beginning to run wild, asking for the vote, leaving her home and going out in the world to earn her own living” (333). As a representation of the Old South, Sophia Jane cannot survive in the “wild” West with its much more loosely defined gender roles. While she is visiting her son and daughter-in-law at their house in “far Western Texas,” she spends an afternoon trying “to put the garden to rights,” and when she comes in “quite flushed and exhilarated,” she “drop[s] dead over the doorsill” (340). The moment is symbolic: in trying to reshape the literal and figurative Texan landscape to look more like the South, she comes face to face with her own irrelevancy in this new order.

But Sophia Jane’s Southern sensibilities are only irrelevant on the far west side of the 97th parallel. In Kyle, on the other hand, she plays a vital, if indirect, role in developing Miranda’s sense of loyalty to Southern values. Sophia Jane’s children help transmit Southern ideological codes of gender to Miranda and her older sister, Maria, for the children have learned from Sophia Jane that in matters of gender, and particularly in matters of feminine behavior and appearance, things “must be done *this* way, and no other!” (“Old Order” 354). In “Old Mortality,” Miranda and Maria learn Southern expectations for and valuations of feminine behavior and appearance by the way their relatives talk about the dead Aunt Amy. In their idealized remembrances of Aunt Amy and her affair with Uncle Gabriel, the relatives teach Miranda and Maria that only a woman who was loved by a man was truly valuable (especially in comparison to the spinster Eva). They also teach the strict “points of [feminine] beauty by which one was judged severely” (“Old Mortality” 176).

Contrary to Miranda’s relatives’ romanticized memories of Amy, Amy does not, in fact, adhere to her family’s prevailing vision of the ideal woman; instead, she does everything in her

power to undermine those damaging ideals. Miranda learns of this rebellion in pieces, but it too becomes part of her heritage. Miranda discovers that, among Amy's many small mutinies, Amy flouted masculine approval of her physical beauty by cutting off her own hair—what Miranda's father calls one of Amy's "chief beauties"—after Gabriel told her he loved it ("Old Mortality" 174). Furthermore, in an act that seems to Amy to be her greatest revolt against her family's gender values, Amy commits suicide. Instead of allowing herself to garner honor in the eyes of her family through matrimony, she not only escapes wifely subservience through suicide, but she also uses her new status as wife to make a widower of Gabriel and deprive him once and for all of implicit control over her life.

The other nonconformist figure in Miranda's life is Eva Parrington, Miranda's spinster cousin. She is already undervalued within Miranda's family because, unlike Amy, she does not fit the rigid Southern conception of female beauty; she is described as an "ugly duckling," "shy and chinless" with an "upper lip [that strains] over two enormous teeth" ("Old Mortality" 178). Unlike Amy, who can use her appearance to manipulate the family's approval in her favor, Eva must use overt tactics, becoming a suffragette who "believed in votes for women, and had traveled about, making speeches" (178).

Miranda finds both Amy's and Eva's dissident behavior disturbing and just as problematic as her family's gender codes. As she and Eva ride the train together home for Uncle Gabriel's funeral, Miranda thinks that Cousin Eva "looked so withered and tired, so famished and sunken in the cheeks, so *old*, somehow," although she could not be more than fifty, and she worries, "Oh, must I ever be like that?" ("Old Mortality" 209, italics original). After all, Eva has become desperately bitter, a "famished" woman hungry for something that she lacks, perhaps

love. Equally unsatisfactory to Miranda is Amy's version of ultimate revolt, since suicide does not exactly set an ideal model of behavior.

Miranda finds herself caught among her family's various problematic and deeply entrenched conceptions of gender identity, all of which she finds equally unacceptable as she attempts to define herself. Once Miranda's father, Harry, picks Miranda and Eva up from the train station, the threesome drives to Miranda's childhood home together, and Miranda thinks from the backseat, "I hate them both . . . *I will be free of them, I shall not even remember them*" ("Old Mortality" 219). The "them" she refers to are of course Harry and Eva, but also the normative force and inescapability of heritage they embody, and Miranda's vitriolic response rejects this inheritance. She wants to dissolve "the ties of blood. . . . She would have no more bonds that smothered her in love and hatred" (220). She wants to no more inhabit the complicated space where her sense of self is always shifting and multiple, weighed down by an entrenched past. Instead, she wants to craft an identity that is somehow disconnected from gender ideology entirely. She wants to inhabit a space wherein she can answer the questions, "What is life?" and "What shall I do with it?" ("Old Mortality" 220) based on her own innate knowledge and will. She wants to discover "her own life now and beyond" (221).

Magical Realism in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider"

Porter introduces supernatural conceptions of death and time from the very first line of "Pale Horse, Pale Rider." The narrative immediately throws the reader into Miranda's temporal drama: "In sleep she knew she was in her bed, but not the bed she had lain down in a few hours since, and the room was not the same but it was a room she had known somewhere" ("Pale Horse" 269). The narrative conflates geography and time: Miranda is not only in the bed of her childhood home, she has actually somehow returned to her childhood days, without her body

having reverted to a child's. The fact that Sophia Jane's horse, Fiddler, and Amy's horse, Miss Lucy, are both alive affirms that this is not just a return to her home in the present. Miranda's body responds to this temporal shift in kind: "Her pulses lagged and paused, and she knew that something strange was going to happen" (269). The "something strange" that is about to happen is not the temporal shift, for she has taken that in stride, and is now planning the quotidian action to "get up and go while they [the household] are all quiet" (269), as if there is nothing odd about her jump through time and space. The "something strange" is instead the appearance of the "lank greenish stranger" (269). But the time flux prepares her for the introduction of the stranger, so that by the time the stranger first appears, Miranda has remembered him as someone paradoxically familiar; she recalls his visitations to her childhood home where he was, as Miranda muses, "welcomed by my grandfather, my great-aunt, my five times removed cousin, my decrepit hound and my silver kitten" (270)—all characters who, presumably, have died. The stranger's familiarity is especially important because we learn that the stranger is a personification of death; Miranda's reference to him as "Death and the Devil" helps qualify their interaction as magical realist, wherein characters interact with the dead or with personified death without questioning the reality of the interaction (270).

We later learn that the temporal shift and personified death take place in a dream; as Miranda rides away from the stranger on Graylie, she says, "Oh, why am I so tired, I must wake up," and subsequently draws "herself up inch by inch out of the pit of sleep" ("Pale Horse" 270). The oneiric quality of these supernatural occurrences is something critics like Chanady take issue with, something that would, for her, exclude "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" from the mode of magical realism. Chanady believes that dream (il)logic does not make something qualify as magical realist, since supernatural events that take place within a dream are given a rational explanation:

they were dreamed, and therefore not real (Chanady 29). For her, if a supernatural element is explained in rational terms (“it was just a dream”), the two realities—the supernatural and the rational—have become hierarchized; they are therefore no longer equally plausible versions of reality, and thus, not magical realism (29). Other critics, however, do not view oneiric supernatural elements as taking away from the supernatural event’s “marvelous” quality. Esplin explains that critics like Varela Bran “list ‘reality, imagination, and dream’ as a combination of elements involved in magic realist texts” (35), so that Miranda’s first dream—as well as all those that follow—“becomes an essential part of the magic realism within [the piece] rather than ruining it” (35).

Because the narrative begins by introducing the reader to both its supernatural and logical realities, the reader is prepared for the culmination of the supernatural treatment of death and time in the dreams leading up to Miranda’s near-death experience, and finally the near-death experience itself. The painstakingly accurate account of Miranda’s falling ill with the flu heightens the supernatural treatment of time and death. As Bollinger notes, Miranda’s experience is a “testament to Porter’s keen observational abilities and accurate memory” of her own near-death experience with the virus (380). Along with the flu symptoms Miranda is already exhibiting when the story begins—she realizes that she “had a burning slow headache, and noticed it now, remembering she had waked up with it and it had in fact begun the evening before” (“Pale Horse” 286), the same night she dreamed of Death—her fever is accompanied by hallucinations—symptoms indicative, Bollinger explains, of the hyper-active immune response that ultimately killed victims of the flu (380-81). The simultaneously rational and supernatural quality of Miranda’s fever dreams reinforces the magical realism of the piece, for, as Bollinger explains, “the narrative neither insists upon nor denies the influence of influenza on Miranda’s

visionary experience” (381). That she is suffering from the deadly effects of influenza is just one description of what is happening to her. A supernatural foray into the afterlife is another. The narrative neither insists on nor dismisses either.

After Miranda falls ill, she begins to have hallucinations. Following an encounter with Adam in which they confess their love for each other, Miranda sees “in sleep that was not sleep” (304) a woodland in which Adam is assaulted by a flurry of arrows. He falls down, presumably dead, but at once is on his feet again, where he is again the victim of a fleet of arrows. Outraged, Miranda jumps in front of him when the next volley of arrows strikes, crying, “No, no . . . It’s my turn now, why must you always be the one to die?” (305). The arrows pass through her harmlessly, but when they hit Adam, they cut “through his body and he lay dead” (305). Bollinger argues that this St. Sebastian-like scene, in addition to his appropriate naming, reinforces Adam’s rightness for the role of “otherworldly interpretive figure” of apocalyptic literature who could “mediate, or explicate, the revelation” that is Miranda’s near-death experience (375). Similarly, Adam’s appearance here as an indomitable figure, one who defies death, is the first signal that he will serve at the end of the story as an apparition who will help correct Miranda’s impulse to alienate herself.

Shortly after Miranda has been brought to the hospital, she has a dream that depicts a psychological projection of the damage wrought on her psyche through her self-imposed alienation from the contradictory paradigms. “Her mind,” the narrator says, “split in two, acknowledged and denied what she saw in one instant, for across an abyss of complaining darkness her reasoning coherent self watched the strange frenzy of the other coldly, reluctant to admit the truth of its visions, its tenacious remorse and despairs” (“Pale Horse” 309-310). This dream is a dramatization of the turmoil she has suffered because of her psychic split between her

family's multiple gender ideologies. The dream represents Miranda's hatred for her complicated, deeply pervasive heritage, hatred she first voiced at the end of the "Old Mortality."

Immediately following this moment of psychic division, Miranda is finally offered a sense of relief in her fifth dream, her near-death experience, what Porter (referencing her own near-death experience) called a "beatific vision" ("Interview" 85). Whereas the previous dream dramatizes for Miranda her psychic split, in her "beatific vision" she becomes fully united with herself, seeing herself, as Frankwitz puts it, "freed from the social constructs of identity through gender" (487). The dream opens with Miranda feeling that she is "a stone at the farthest bottom of life . . . entirely withdrawn from all human concerns," where "all ties of blood and the desires of the heart dissolved and fell away from her, and there remained of her only a minute fiercely burning particle of being that knew itself alone, that relied upon nothing beyond itself for its strength . . . being itself composed entirely of one single motive, the stubborn will to live" ("Pale Horse" 310-11). The dualistic ties that have bound her have now dissolved, leaving her a purified, unified particle, something without fissure, without cleft. She is only herself. To Miranda, this vision becomes not only, as Frankwitz puts it, "a vision of a world in which gender is not a factor of identity" (487), but also a vision of a world in which identities are not painstakingly pieced together from competing claims—nationalistic, cultural, ontological—but instead arise from their intrinsic, authentic self. That world would be, for Miranda, paradise.

She then sees others like herself, "a great company of human beings" whose "faces were transfigured, each in its own beauty. . . . Their eyes were clear and untroubled as good weather, and they cast no shadows. They were pure identities" ("Pale Horse" 311). As is characteristic of magical realist fiction, Miranda wholeheartedly accepts this new world, a world where, as Esplin says when offering a magical realist reading of another of Porter's stories, "Flowering Judas,"

“the dead live together in much the same way they did when they were *alive*” (27), but in a state of timelessness, since they are immortal. At first, her familiar and familial dead seem to be exemplars of the kind of identity she wants to shape for herself—a “pure” one. But instead, the ghostly figures communicate through their actions the problems with “modernity’s . . . psychological assumptions about autonomous consciousness and self-constituted identity and propose instead a model of the self that is collective: subjectivity is not singular but several, not merely individual and existential by mythic, cumulative, participatory” (Zamora 498). The figures “surrounded [Miranda] smoothly on silent feet, then turned their entranced faces again toward the sea, and she moved among them easily as a wave among waves. The drifting circle widened, separated, and each figure was alone but not solitary” (“Pale Horse” 311). This, the ghosts communicate wordlessly, is how an identity should be or can be: not “tangled together [with others] like badly cast fishing lines” (269), as Miranda complains at the beginning of the story, but not alienated either. True paradise, their presence seems to signal, is to be among “a great company of human beings” (311), each with its own “pure identity.”

But in order for the vision to be meaningful or transformative to Miranda, it must end. Adam is her spirit guide out of that vision. Her feelings of “prodigal warmth” and joy in that place, among those beings, are suddenly disrupted: “Something, somebody, was missing, she had lost something, she had left something valuable in another country” (“Pale Horse” 311-12), she realizes, and then finally, it comes to her: “Where are the dead? We have forgotten the dead, oh, the dead, where are they?” (312). Then she herself returns from the brink of death. As has been observed by Bollinger and others, the particular “somebody” Miranda names is Adam, whom she preternaturally senses has died. Bollinger claims that if “Pale Horse, Pale Rider” imitates an apocalyptic narrative, which would typically offer comfort or meaning to its audience, then

Adam's absence as the would-be interpreter of Miranda's vision (a key element of apocalyptic literature) points to Porter's refusal "to offer such a sense of resolution—her apocalyptic narrative leaves its recipient [Miranda] and audience with a sense of loss and uncertainty, not reassurance" (379). But Adam *is* present, just present elsewhere. Like most ghosts of magical realism, Adam is "double (here and not)" (Zamora 497)—rather than irrevocably lost. The previous iteration of him as an apparition—during Miranda's St. Sebastian-like vision of his "perpetual death and resurrection" ("Pale Horse" 305)—has prepared Miranda for this duality. If Adam were truly lost to Miranda, her realization would cause her to mourn. But instead, her realization that he is absent in this new space but present in another country impels her to decide, "Oh, I must go back!" (312).

And indeed, after Miranda's miraculous recovery, he eventually does return to her. But first, Miranda wakes to inevitable disappointment. Upon recovering, Miranda takes on a lifeless version of the possibility she saw for herself; that is, whereas in the dream she envisioned individuality distinct from but connected to community, now she tries to mimic what she saw by wearing a color that is at once a combination of opposite colors (black and white) and also its own distinct color. When she first wakes, it is to a world that she hopes could be communal and individual, or "pure": "the colorless sunlight slanting on the snow, under a sky drained of its blue" ("Pale Horse" 313). And in an effort to recapture the lost possibility of unity and singularity offered her in her vision, she asks for "gray suede gauntlets without straps, two pairs gray sheer stockings without clocks" and "one walking stick of silvery wood with a silver knob" (316). But her efforts to mimic the world she saw in her vision fall flat. She feels miserable: "In her extremity of grief for what she had so briefly won, she folded her painful body together and wept silently, shamelessly, in pity for herself and her lost rapture. There was no escape" (314).

The influenza has left lasting damage upon her body, but the absence of the kind of interconnectedness that the vision offered has almost scarred her more.

Caught between the world of the living and the world of the dead, Miranda seems to have been permanently changed for the worse until Adam's appearance in the final moments of the story. During a passage in which she seems to prophesy her future, she addresses him aloud, essentially summoning him to her. Though she has "one foot in either world now; soon," she says, "I shall cross back and be at home again" ("Pale Horse" 317). She is despairing that there is at all a way to balance dualisms, to create her own identity without allowing it to be absorbed in one paradigm or another. Shortly, she addresses Adam: "Still I wish for you here; I wish you had come back, what do you think I came back for, Adam, to be deceived like this?" He appears immediately, "invisible but urgently present, a ghost but more alive than she was, the last intolerable cheat of her heart" (317). Whereas in the world of the dead he was an apparition from the world of the living, now that she is back in the world of the living, he is the figure of a dead man. His reappearance reminds her of what she learned from her near-death experience. He acts as a link "to lost families and communities" and suggests "reunion and communion" (497), a joining of the worlds of the living and the dead, and by extension, the multiplicities of cultures from which Miranda had previously tried to break ties. Her time with the supernatural—ghosts and dreams—helps her see the unknowableness of things. In doubting reality, she also enlivens her reality and deepens her sense of self; she feels reconnected with a revised sense of community. Her understanding is by no means perfect, and at times "tomorrow" feels like "dead cold light," but at least "there would be time for everything" (317)—and here the word "everything" signals an embrace of all the contradictory, complementary cultures that comprise Miranda's heritage.

Porter's feelings after her own near-death experience reinforce such a reading. Of the period following her "beatific vision," Porter explained, "I made the mistake of thinking I was quite like anybody else, of trying to live like other people. It took me a long time to realize that that simply wasn't true, that I had my own needs and that I had to live like me" ("Interview" 85). After that realization, Porter claims that she "went running off on that wild escapade to Mexico. . . . It was a terribly exciting time. It was alive, but death was in it. But," she added, "nobody seemed to think of that: life was in it, too" (85–86). In the same interview, Porter said of her family that although as a young person she had been frightened by the weight of her pervasive family heritage, "I look back on it now and think how perfectly wonderful, what a tremendously beautiful life it was. Everything in it had meaning" (82). Both sentiments hint at some positive life change for Porter—changes that are echoed in the (chronological) conclusion to Miranda's story. Contrary to other scholars' pessimistic readings of the end of "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," the narrative actually seems to hint at an admittedly timorously hopeful future.

The narrative demonstrates a positive change in that, while Miranda maintains a sense of independence from her family and the gender codes and ideologies they unavoidably pass on, she no longer covets isolation from them or their entrenched values. What Kolmar suggests of the influence of ghosts holds true in Miranda's narrative: the involvement of ghosts "proposes interconnection—between things, between times—as the critical mode of organization—of human life and of narrative" (243). Miranda has begun to recognize that such a "dialectic of interconnection" is valuable. The end of the story depicts her realization that limiting her understanding of the world to her own private experience actually inhibits the development of her unique self, a "pure identity," and is just as debilitating to that project as total dependence on inheritance of familial or regional ideologies.

But this positive reading is not feasible unless we view the narrative through the lens of magical realism. In using magical realism to explore the question of her own sense of self, Porter embraced her complicated heritage and her fractured past, shaping both into her own fitting artistic identity. Porter once explained, “Human life itself may be almost pure chaos, but the work of the artist—the only thing he’s good for—is to take these handfuls of confusion and disparate things, things that seem to be irreconcilable, and put them together in a frame to give them some kind of shape and meaning” (“Interview” 88). It was perhaps her experimentation with the magical realist mode—a mode that is capable of uniting disparate realities—that enabled her to do something her modernist contemporaries could not do: articulate the paradigm-shifting trauma of the Spanish Influenza as both a survivor and a witness to others’ suffering. Additionally, by employing a mode that treated the dualistic as unitary or at least complementary, she created, as Zamora and Faris put it, “space for interactions of diversity” (3). Instead of insisting on the rightness of one vision of reality, Porter allowed for multiple. Both Miranda and Porter successfully reclaim the value of interconnectedness while maintaining individuality. The magical realist form exposes the paradox of selfhood: it contains the universal, the cultural, but is also inescapably unitary, singular.

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