Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty and *Ethan Brand*

JOAN GIVNER, *University of Saskatchewan, Regina*

Eunice Glenn has noted the similarity, especially in the symbolism, between Eudora Welty's *Petrified Man* and Hawthorne's *Ethan Brand.*[1] No one, so far as I know, has noted the much greater similarity in theme, structure and symbolism between Hawthorne's story and Katherine Anne Porter's *Theft.* A comparison of all three stories has more than the interest of showing one writer's indebtedness to another, it also provides an effective illustration of the nature and use of the grotesque in contemporary literature.

Katherine Anne Porter's *Theft* epitomizes a moral preoccupation which runs through all her fiction, and her story is a most concise and clear statement of her chief theme.[2] Frequently her own phrase "the negative collusion of evil" is used to describe the theme, but the phrase out of its proper context in *Ship of Fools* is somewhat inaccurate since it suggests and is usually taken to mean merely passive indifference to evil-doers. If Dr. Schumann's statement is reproduced in its entirety, its meaning is seen to be something stronger than passivity: "I agree with the Captain it takes a strong character to be really evil. Most of us are too slack, half-hearted, or cowardly — luckily, I suppose. Our collusion with evil is only negative, consent by default, you might say. I suppose in our hearts our sympathies are with the criminal because he really commits the deeds we only dream of doing!"[3]

What Katherine Anne Porter condemns in all her work is a course of action by which a person, remaining blameless himself, encourages someone else vicariously to perform the evil he wills and dares not do. She returns tirelessly to this vice because it seems to her to be so common, so underestimated and so morally devastating. The women in *Magic,* the girl in *Theft,* Laura in *Flowering Judas* and countless others are guilty of vicarious sinning.

It is interesting to note that in describing such vicarious activity she has used the phrase which echoes through Hawthorne's *Ethan Brand.* Commenting on the death of Hart Crane she said: "His parasites let him commit suicide. He made such a good show and they had no lives of their own, so they lived vicariously by his, you know. And that, of course, is the unpardonable sin."[4]

The definition of the unpardonable sin is the subject of a number of Hawthorne's works. It is referred to by Arthur Dimmesdale, for instance, when in *The Scarlet Letter* he says: "We are not, Hester, the worst sinners in the world. There is one worse than even the polluted priest! That old man's revenge has been blacker than my sin. He has violated, in cold blood, the sanctity of a human heart."[5]

The subject appears most concisely in *Ethan Brand,* the account of a man who sets out with the avowed purpose of discovering the unpardonable sin and after all his travels finally does discover it in his own heart. This story

in presenting Hawthorne's chief theme in its most concentrated form, stands in relation to the rest of his work in much the same crucial position as does *Theft* to Katherine Anne Porter's other works. Ethan Brand's sin is defined in this way: "He was now a cold observer, looking on mankind as the subject of his experiments, and, at length, converting man and woman to be his puppets, and pulling the wires that moved them to such degrees of crime as were demanded for his study. Thus Ethan Brand became a fiend. He began to be so from the moment that his moral nature had ceased to keep the pace of improvement with his intellect."[6]

The sin which concerns Katherine Anne Porter resembles Hawthorne's not only in its nature but in its source. Both develop from the solitary, meditative, uncommitted life such as an artist might lead. Marius Bewley commenting on Ethan Brand says that his crime "sounds suspiciously as if he had become a novelist."[7] And perhaps it is no coincidence either that many of Katherine Anne Porter's protagonists are artists. Both writers characterize their sinners by making them proud. Ethan Brand is Faustian in his boast that his sin exceeds all others: "'It is a sin that grew within my own breast', replied Ethan Brand, standing erect with a pride that distinguishes all enthusiasts of his stamp. 'A sin that grew nowhere else! The sin of an intellect that triumphed over the sense of brotherhood with man and reverence for God, and sacrificed everything to its own mighty claims! The only sin that deserves a recompense of immortal agony! Freely, were it to do again, would I incur the guilt. Unshrinkingly I accept the retribution!'"[8]

Such a flamboyant declaration is foreign to Katherine Anne Porter's style, but the girl in *Theft* is marked in an equally strong, if quieter way, by pride. The girl's meditation upon her losses shows clearly that she has confused malevolence with magnanimity and that her attitude towards her treatment of others is complacent, even self-congratulatory.

Katherine Anne Porter follows Hawthorne in emphasizing the inhuman nature of her protagonist by comparing her with three other sinners, who, while they are despicable wretches, still retain some connections, no matter how tenuous, with the rest of humanity. Camilo, Bill and the janitress of *Theft,* exactly like the three worthies (rascals) of *Ethan Brand,* are distinguished by cheating, swearing and drunkenness. From the comparison with these other characters the point clearly emerges that while Ethan Brand and the girl of *Theft* are marked by none of the obvious signs of degeneracy they are, in fact, more destructive and more dangerous. Ethan Brand is compared further with Bartram, the lime-burner, who is dull and insensitive to the extent of being sub-human. Both stories make clear that the sensitive, intelligent person has an equal capacity both for good and for evil. Both Ethan Brand and the girl gravitate, he consciously and she unconsciously, towards evil. They become fiends and their devilishness is indicated in crudely medieval terms — by fiery furnaces and flashing, Satanic eyes. This method is not surprising in *Ethan Brand* since Hawthorne's story is consistently close to moral allegory. In Katherine Anne Porter's subdued narrative the sudden apparition of the demonic janitress stoking up her furnace is somewhat more startling. No doubt it is intentionally so, both as a dramatic ploy and as an indication of the author's unequivocal moral censure. She has little patience with euphemism and no time for moral prevarication as her introduction to Eudora Welty's earliest collection of short stories clearly shows. There she praises the author for eschewing: "That slack tolerance or sentimental tenderness

towards symptomatic evils that amounts to criminal collusion between author and character."[9]

While the similarities between *Ethan Brand* and *Theft* are striking enough (and a re-reading of both stories will expand the list), the differences are equally significant. Of the two stories, Hawthorne's is much richer in specification because he is concerned with more than a definition of the unpardonable sin. His intention, and he carries it out successfully, is to evoke a strong emotional reaction to the crime. Chiefly the story arouses feelings of horror and of awe. The eerie laughter of Brand, his dreadful aspect, the hints of the evil he has wrought upon Esther — all conspire to stress the enormity of his evil. There is also a strong sense of his loneliness and his inaccessibility to human help. Finally his crime is thrown into sharp relief by comparison with the innocence of young Joe and by the description of the fresh morning landscape as the sun rises over Graylock.

Katherine Anne Porter's story is equally distinguished for its poetic qualities. But, unlike Hawthorne's story, hers is not remarkable for richness of detail nor does it indeed make much of a visual impact at all. Rather its qualities are auditory and the poetic language can stand by itself as a rare and astonishing example of stylistic mastery. Within the story the effect of the language is not separable from the theme, but style and theme merge to form a richly orchestrated account of a journey of self-awareness which occurs at the level of consciousness described by the author (again in her self-revealing introductory essay to Eudora Welty) as the place, "where external act and the internal voiceless life of the human imagination almost meet and mingle on the mysterious threshold between dream and waking, one reality refusing to admit or confirm the existence of the other, yet both conspiring toward the same end."

Katherine Anne Porter's is a much more compressed story than Hawthorne's and it has been stripped to the bare essentials. Her concern is chiefly with the definition of the girl's wrongdoing and the part played in it by self-delusion. To this end she has used considerable ingenuity in delaying the revelation of the girl's destructiveness to the final lines of the story where it has the effect of startling equally the protagonist and the reader. Only at this moment does it become apparent that the girl is responsible for the increasing boldness of those who abuse her. Her moral position, therefore, is weaker than that of the Satanic janitress since she bears the guilt both for the thefts and for the moral deterioration of the thieves. Katherine Anne Porter excels in the dramatization of such moments of sudden insight and many comparable conclusions to her other stories come to mind, such as Miranda's in *The Grave,* Frau Rittersdorf's in *Ship of Fools* and Laura's in *Flowering Judas* (this last, however, takes place in a dream for Laura's conscious mind is unable to acknowledge her guilt).

The fact that the girl of *Theft* has been unconscious of the harmful implications of her behaviour in no way lessens her guilt. On the subject of unconscious evil-doing Katherine Anne Porter has said elsewhere: "An illuminant is not always illuminant for good. The most dangerous people in the world are the illuminated ones through whom forces act when they themselves are unconscious of their motives. And yet, no force has ever acted through either a saint or an evil person that wasn't somehow directed to further the ends and the ambitions and hopes of that person, which makes

me feel that the instrument is not altogether so innocent and so helpless as we have been saying."[10]

The difference between the subtlety and understatement of Katherine Anne Porter's story and the sensational nature of Eudora Welty's *Petrified Man* is so great as almost to obscure the fact that their subject matter is identical. Like Hawthorne and Porter, Eudora Welty is concerned here with depicting characters who are so spiritually maimed that they have lost the basic human qualities. There is no question, however, of speaking of these people in Satanic terms or of describing their deficiencies as sins, and *Petrified Man* clearly illustrates the problem of arousing in the reader a strong emotional response without using a conventional theological or moral set of values.

Eudora Welty imposes a further restriction upon herself by omitting any positive standard of the good or beautiful by which her sordid characters may be compared. There is nothing in the story that fulfils the same purpose as does Hawthorne's majestic landscape, the innocence of young Joe or the beauty of Katherine Anne Porter's writing and composition. True, there is a young boy in *Petrified Man,* but he is far from being innocent. His final remark shows that he is stunted from birth and different only in degree from the women. Eudora Welty shows unadulterated sordidness or, to use again Katherine Anne Porter's phrase, "vulgarity absolute, chemically pure, exposed mercilessly to its final subhuman depths."

The women of the beauty shop world share the same essential deficiency as Ethan Brand and the girl of *Theft.* They are no longer able to love, either as friends, wives or mothers. Love has been perverted into channels of narcissism, materialistic opportunism and cheap sentimentality. For the sexual expression of love they have substituted the vicarious thrills of movie magazines, maudlin reminiscences and the gratifications of the "beauty treatments." And for religion they have substituted the teller of fortunes.

Eudora Welty chooses to convey the sterility of these lives in aesthetic terms, to show spiritual poverty by means of bad taste. She sets the scene in a beauty shop and the stroke is a clever one since the women are clearly physically repulsive (even a convicted rapist is unmoved by the sight of Mrs. Pike at his bedside). She works every ironic possibility in this paradoxical situation, observing with her sharp photographic eye the most telling details of ugly decor and vulgar posture. She records the vulgar language and gross sentiments of the women and presents a devastating picture of blunted sensibilities. The picture, however, in spite of its potential for horror, does not so far arouse shock. The main reason is that the kind of ugliness she describes is so widespread that it no longer astonishes. The scene strikes the reader as familiar and amusing.

But the writer is not satisfied with arousing merely an amused wince, she wishes to provoke a stronger reaction and in order to do so she moves into the grotesque world of the freak show. The freaks are described in loving detail by the "beauty operator," Leota, and the equation between them, Leota, Mrs. Fletcher and Mrs. Pike is inescapable. Like these women the freaks are stunted from birth, grotesquely joined together and the most interesting one of all is reportedly turning into stone. The point of this detail is to suggest that the physical transformation into stone which the "petrified man" simulates is taking place actually and spiritually in the women. Eudora Welty's

indebtedness to Hawthorne for this central image has been noted. She probably is indebted also to the legend of the Gorgons, whose horrendous aspect turned men to stone. The reference is one of many in the story to the women of legend and mythology. The Trojan women, the Sabine women and the Gorgons are all evoked with the purpose of showing that the women of the story are totally disqualified from either heroic virtues or heroic vices. Their last act is to swoop down, like the Thracian women, and wreak a pointless vengeance for their miscellaneous grievances upon the only available male object, Billy Boy.

This final act is the dramatic climax of the story and like the account of Mrs. Pike's "treachery" it seems strained and superfluous. Apparently it proved difficult to resolve satisfactorily an account of characters whom the writer has endowed with no sympathetic traits and no capacity for introspection. In her conclusion she resorts once again to exaggerated and forced effects. Hence Mrs. Pike's unlikely discovery of the man's improbable disguise and Leota's unaccountable outrage.

William Van O'Connor, in his essay on the grotesque, has explained such fantastic distortions as the attempt to make something heroic, poetic and awesome of material which is fundamentally antipoetic and unheroic. He concludes as follows:

> Modern literature has sought to incorporate the antipoetic into the traditionally poetic, the cowardly into the heroic, the ignoble into the noble, the realistic into the romantic, the ugly into the beautiful. Modern literature has heightened and stylized the antipoetic and the ugly. The grotesque, as a genre or a form of modern literature, simultaneously confronts the antipoetic and the ugly and presents them, when viewed out of the side of the eye, as the closest we can come to the sublime. The grotesque affronts our sense of established order and satisfies, or partly satisfies, our need for at least a tentative, a more flexible ordering.[11]

His statement is one with which few writers and critics of the grotesque would quarrel, and Eudora Welty's *Petrified Man* adds a further example to those in his essay. But it seems to me that his statement must lead inevitably to the conclusion that the use of bizarre characters and situations is a mechanism by which importance is thrust upon basically unimportant material. Such a process of inflation is quite distinct from the discovery of the sublime in the mundane and from the mock-heroic and it is a pretentious device. The recourse to shock tactics indicates an imaginative failure and the extent to which a writer depends upon such effects is a measure of that failure. This fact is often obscured because the grotesque has been used as one effect among many by writers of considerable stature and there is always a tendency for followers of major figures to imitate the bold, obvious features and to ignore the more complicated ones. Such a situation has developed among the followers of Faulkner, many of whom have been misleading and even remiss in their comments on the use of the grotesque. Flannery O'Connor's explanation in *The Living Novel,* for example, that "for the hard of hearing you shout" seems to me to be an unconscionable shift of responsibility from writer to reader. Katherine Anne Porter's avowed partisanship for Eudora Welty has led her to defend her friend's grotesques, as Eudora Welty herself does, by the specious reasoning that they are not really curiosities but "actual

living types observed more keenly than the average eye is capable of observing." The argument comes strangely from Miss Porter who has so consistently condemned sensationalism in art and language, comparing it with "Nazi surgical experiments of cutting and uniting human nerve ends never meant to touch each other."

The comparison of three stories, so strikingly similar in theme and form as *Ethan Brand, Theft* and *Petrified Man* should throw some light upon the use of the grotesque, its nature and its limitations. All three writers deal with a particular defect of the human heart. Eudora Welty differs from the other two by not choosing to analyze her characters' spiritual states. Instead she shows at once that they are rotten and proceeds to externalize their flaws by piling one crudity upon another. Her exertions are successful in that the impact is truly startling. But her assault on the reader is similar to that of the neon sign and no more moving, in spite of its being directed against a serious human failure. Her success, in this story at least, is of a very minor kind. Hawthorne and Katherine Anne Porter also use at the end of their stories such weird effects as the metamorphosis of the janitress into a devil and the reduction of Ethan Brand into stone. But their stories do not depend upon these shocks, which only serve to give a final emphasis to a spiritual deficiency that has been carefully explored. Their superiority lies in the fact that they *sensitize* their readers to a subtle form of corruption.

NOTES

[1]Eunice Glenn, "Fantasy in the Fiction of Eudora Welty," in *Critiques and Essays on Modern Fiction 1920-1951*, ed. John W. Aldride (New York, 1952), pp. 506-17

[2]For a more detailed explanation of this story see my account, "A Re-reading of Katherine Anne Porter's *Theft*," *Studies in Short Fiction*, 6 (Summer 1969), pp. 463-65.

[3]Katherine Anne Porter, *Ship of Fools* (Boston, 1962), p. 294.

[4]Katherine Anne Porter, "A Country and Some People I Love," an interview by Hank Lopez, *Harper's*, Sept. 1965, pp. 58-68.

[5]Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Scarlet Letter," in *The Complete Novels and Selected Tales of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. Norman Holmes Pearson (New York, 1937), p. 200.

[6]Hawthorne, p. 1194.

[7]Marius Bewley, *The Complex Fate* (New York, 1967), p. 59.

[8]Hawthorne, p. 1195.

[9]Katherine Anne Porter, "Eudora Welty and *Curtain of Green*," in *The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings of Katherine Anne Porter* (New York, 1970), p. 289.

[10]Mark Van Doren, ed., *The New Invitation to Learning* (New York, 1942), p. 230.

[11]William Van O'Connor, *The Grotesque: An American Genre and Other Essays* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), p. 19.