

Death and Repetition in Porter's Miranda Stories

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EARLY in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," in one of Miranda Gay's dreams, Katherine Anne Porter introduces the obsessive center of her final Miranda story, indeed of the whole Miranda series: death, specifically Miranda's perception of her own death. ("The Grave," "Old Mortality," "Pale Horse, Pale Rider"—the major titles alone reveal as much.) "And the stranger [death]? Where is that lank greenish stranger I remember hanging about the place, welcomed by my grandfather, my great-aunt, my five times removed cousin, my decrepit hound and my silver kitten? Why did they take to him, I wonder? And where are they now? Yet I saw him pass the window in the evening. What else besides them did I have in the world? Nothing. Nothing is mine, I have only nothing but it is enough, it is beautiful and it is all mine."¹ Should Miranda take to this stranger, as her grandfather and the others have done, or flee him? Are the others (and would she be, once dead) anywhere now? And what is this beautifully sufficient "nothing" allowed by death? Such questions and their possible answers center on the idea of repetition. In "The Grave," the climactic story in *The Old Order*, the first of two groups of Miranda stories, Miranda initially rejects the perceived bondage of repeated meaning (the symbolic silver dove's interpretation of death) to embrace the freedom of unconnected existence, of modernity—the freedom of the grave. Repeating that earlier day, however, the story's coda allows the adult Miranda a chance to revise her youthful choice, to reaccept repeated meaning as something other than mere bondage. Moreover, "Old Mortality" and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," the second group of stories, together repeat *The Old Order*. That is, they

¹ *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1965), pp. 269–70. Subsequent references to this and the other stories are from this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.

cover roughly the same chronological years of Miranda's life as *The Old Order* and record the same general movement of her consciousness.² The repetitious second set of stories, though, calls into question, rather than exactly reconstituting or forwarding, that revisionary final scene from "The Grave," recovering the possible meaninglessness of Miranda's experiences only latent in that perhaps too pat earlier conclusion.

I

In both archaic and Judeo-Christian traditions, repetition grounds all meaning, knowing, and identity, making possible the mythic and the sacred. As Mircea Eliade in particular has described it, the archaic mind discovered reality as the profane object or event (the single, the unconnected, naked of past and paradigm) repeating itself as the sacred (the double, the connected, informed by past and paradigm, a present repetition of an earlier act). The digging and planting of a field, for example, reproduces the divine act of cosmic fructification; the building of a house reproduces the divine act of cosmic creation. Both human actions "reactualize" something that took place "in the beginning."³ Such repetition, of course, requires a kind of double perception, so that digging his field, the archaic man must know his tool simultaneously as both an archetypal phallus and a simple spade. Thus life, according to Eliade, "is lived on a twofold plane," taking "its course as human existence and, at the same time, shar[ing] in a transhuman life, that of the cosmos or the gods."⁴ In this way the past informs and verifies the present, providing "the doubling context that rescues it from that singleness which, knowing only itself, knows nothing."⁵

The move from this archaic perception of repetition to the Judeo-Christian tradition requires, among other things, a complex shift from a concept of cyclical time to one of linear time,

² Although "Old Mortality" and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" appeared in print earlier (1939, *The Old Order* in 1944), the stories in *The Old Order* were written first (finished by 1934, "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" and "Old Mortality" by 1936). See Joan Givner, *Katherine Anne Porter: A Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982).

³ *The Sacred and the Profane: the Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1959), pp. 30-31, 68-69.

⁴ *The Sacred and the Profane*, p. 167.

⁵ Donald Kartiganer, "Faulkner's Art of Repetition," Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference, Oxford, Mississippi, 4 Aug. 1987, p. 5—forthcoming.

from a theory of eternal return, which valorizes events for their reproduction of prior events, to a theory of progressive history, which instead valorizes events for their position in a foretold cosmic pattern with a beginning, middle, and end.⁶ Even so, the archaic and the Judeo-Christian perceptions share a sense of doubleness, a sense of repetition as a solid ground of knowing and identity. Each moment in the life of the individual and in time may be a new moment, according to the linear Judeo-Christian perception, never to come again. Yet each is nonetheless firmly contextualized *in* history—the whole patterned history to be completed in the future but intelligibly predicated in the past. Each new moment thus receives its highest meaning only as a fulfillment, as a repetition in real, actual time of that which has been foretold.⁷

The modern consciousness, however, seeks to undo this notion of grounded repetition, of repetition as the re-enactment of a given ground. The modern consciousness seeks to deny the past's impingement on the present, to deny all confirming priorities. Such denial, according to Paul de Man, is, in fact, the essence of modernity: "a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier, in the hope of reaching at last a point that could be called a true present, a point of origin that makes a new departure."⁸ Thus to the modernist, grounded repetition becomes a way of knowing only that dimension of one's self and moment that is similar to what has already been, only that which continues (bondage to the dead past). The modernist quest is to unground repetition, to replace mythic memory with personal memory, thereby establishing the identity of a single solitary self, unlike all others that have ever been or will be (freedom of the unconnected present).⁹

II

In "The Grave" the modern consciousness that has been developing in Miranda throughout the earlier stories in *The Old Order* emerges as she serenely accepts the fact of her own in-

⁶ Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return or, Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), p. 104.

⁷ *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, p. 90; *The Sacred and the Profane*, p. 112.

⁸ *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), p. 148.

⁹ I've borrowed this discussion of repetition from Kartiganer.

evitable death without interpretation. That is, Miranda rejects all inherited structures of meaning—the past, the mythic, and the sacred (all suggested by the silver dove)—for the freedom of existence unmediated by structure—for the present, the personal, and the profane (all suggested by the rabbit).

Almost Miranda's whole life (even though she's only nine) has been a sort of modernist quest balancing her desire to escape the tyranny of inherited patterns—represented by her family, especially her grandmother—and her fear of death unmediated by those patterns. She's haunted particularly by the death of her mother. Increasingly, however, the inherited patterns fail to assure her. As an incident in "The Circus" illustrates, they fail to contain or even to lessen Miranda's inescapably real horror of death:

A creature in a blousy white overall with ruffles at the neck and ankles, with bone-white skull and chalk-white face . . . pranced along a wire stretched down the center of the ring, balancing a long thin pole with little wheels at either end. Miranda thought at first he was walking on air, or flying, and this did not surprise her; but when she saw the wire, she was terrified. . . . He paused, slipped, the flapping white leg waved in space; he staggered, wobbled, slipped sidewise, plunged, and caught the wire with frantic knee, hanging there upside down, the other leg waving like a feeler above his head; slipped once more, caught by one frenzied heel, and swung back and forth like a scarf. . . . The crowd roared with savage delight, shrieks of dreadful laughter. . . . Miranda shrieked too with real pain, clutching at her stomach with her knees drawn up. (Pp. 344-45)

So frightened she has to be taken home immediately, Miranda later that night tries to imagine the beautiful circus acts she missed by leaving early. But her imaginings cannot dispel her terrifying memories of the death's-head clown: "She fell asleep, and her invented memories gave way before her real ones, the bitter terrified face of the man in blowsy [sic] white falling to his death—ah, the cruel joke! . . . She screamed in her sleep and sat up crying for deliverance from her torments."

Elsewhere religious platitudes such as her sister Maria's in "The Witness" over a dead rabbit—"Safe in Heaven" (p. 342)—fail to satisfy the questions of a "quick flighty little girl of six" who always wants "to know the worst." With Maria's profession of inherited meaning can be compared Miranda's experi-

ence in "The Fig Tree." In that story Miranda buries a dead baby chicken under a fig tree, then hears it call to her, she thinks, from the grave. Immediately forced away by her departing family, who threaten to leave her unless she comes at once, Miranda has no time to exhume the chicken and so can only agonize over the horror of its apparently premature burial:

Miranda felt she couldn't bear to be left. She ran all shaking with fright. Her father gave her the annoyed look he always gave her when he said something to upset her and then saw that she was upset. His words were kind but his voice scolded: "Stop getting so excited, Baby, you know we wouldn't leave you for anything." Miranda wanted to talk back: "Then why did you say so?" but she was still listening for that tiny sound: "Weep, weep." She lagged and pulled backward, looking over her shoulder, but her father hurried her towards the carry-all. But things didn't make sounds if they were dead. They couldn't. That was one of the signs. Oh, but she had heard it. . . . Miranda's ears buzzed and she had a dull round pain in her just under her front ribs. She had to go back and let him out. He'd never get out by himself, all tangled up in tissue paper and that shoebox. He'd never get out without her. (Pp. 356-57)

And even though Great-Aunt Eliza later explains the "weep, weep" as tree frogs calling from the fig tree, Miranda's terror here, like that at the circus, is real and affecting. To her the afterlife, and thus this life too, seems less certain than someone like Maria supposes. To her, the inherited order of family and religion seems increasingly to provide the tyranny but not the security.

Miranda's modernist quest ends, apparently, in "The Grave." There she and Paul are literally questers, hunters, as they often have been before, of rabbits and doves. This day, however, their hunt is special, yielding richly symbolic game, for each of the story's two central episodes, the finding of a silver dove in her grandfather's grave and the skinning of a pregnant rabbit, portentously underscores Miranda's inevitable death. Only the first event, however, the finding of the dove, contextualizes that death; the other merely presents it. Apparently unconsciously, Miranda initially chooses the later, natural event.

Compared to that day's other vision of death, the profanity of the rabbit's death—its singleness, to use Eliade's term—is apparent. Unlike the flesh and blood rabbit, the silver dove—a work

of art, an inherited form—provides the doubling context Eliade considers necessary for meaning. The dove promises the fulfillment of a pattern foretold, the resurrection of man's immortal soul through the power of the Holy Spirit, a human repetition of the earlier divine resurrection.¹⁰ The silver dove thus locates Miranda's own death firmly within the whole transhuman history of the world, indeed of the cosmos. The rabbit, on the other hand, without such a paradigmatic structure, is simply dead. Yet in its death inheres a sort of innocence, a freedom beyond the dove's interpretation, a present force apparently uncontained by the dove's fixed form.

Skinning the rabbit, Paul cuts it open to reveal the foetuses:

Miranda said, "Oh, I want to *see*," under her breath. She looked and looked . . . filled with pity and astonishment and a kind of shocked delight in the wonderful little creatures for their own sakes, they were so pretty. She touched one of them ever so carefully, "Ah, there's blood running over them," she said and began to tremble without knowing why. Yet she wanted most deeply to see and to know. Having seen, she felt at once as if she had known all along. The very memory of her former ignorance faded, she had always known just this. (P. 366)

Here Miranda tremblingly intuits the raw vitality of unmediated experience in its quintessence. She intuits the mysteriously intertwining chaos of birth and death and intuits also something of her own inevitable participation in that chaos, with an emphasis on her developing woman's body and its reproductive potential: "She understood a little of the secret, formless intuitions in her own mind and body, which had been clearing up, taking form, so gradually and so steadily she had not realized that she was learning what she had to know." Forgotten in this moment is Miranda's earlier fear of death. Forgotten, too, in her implicit choice of the rabbit, are the silver dove and all it suggests. And the moment—the nothingness, to borrow from Miranda's dream, of the uninhibited, uninherited, unconnected present moment—is serenely beautiful. It is enough.

So why, then, the coda? Why not end the story here at the moment Miranda escapes the bondage of the dead past to enter

¹⁰ For a fuller discussion of the dove as a Christian symbol, see my "Literary Criticism, Katherine Anne Porter's Consciousness, and the Silver Dove," *Studies in Short Fiction*, 25 (1988), 109–15.

the freedom of the unconnected present? Perhaps because the coda illustrates the consequence of her choice: bleakness, the price Miranda must pay for such freedom as she gains by looking into the ungrounded abyss of nature. For in the freedom of the grave (the modernist freeplay of meaning) inheres that freedom's obverse, the possibility of absolutely blank oblivion (meaninglessness).

The cycle of birth and death in "The Grave" is, as the title suggests, ironically truncated. No birth occurs there, as both the rabbit and her foetuses die, belying Miranda's excitement over her developing reproductive potential and foreshadowing the bleakness of the story's concluding scene. On Miranda, age nine, such irony is lost. But for Miranda twenty years later it is inescapable. The initial gaiety occasioned by the modernist enterprise having given way to its implicit despair, Miranda in the coda is a stranger in a strange country, surrounded by death.

Significantly, the coda's market scene repeats that earlier day from Miranda's childhood, presenting again Miranda, Paul, graves, baby rabbits, and the silver dove. The repetition, however, is not simply a reconstitution of the past event. Rather it's an example of what Kierkegaard calls repetition forward, a synthesis of grounded and ungrounded repetitions,¹¹ the reflective reinterpretation of the past's impingement on the present.¹² That is, neither wholly grounded and thus able only to imitate its origin, nor wholly ungrounded and thus completely uprooted, able to know only itself, repetition forward recovers new possibilities in repetition while avoiding the utter abandonment of meaning:

One day [twenty years later] she was picking her path among the puddles and crushed refuse of a market street in a strange city of a strange country, when without warning, plain and clear in its true colors as if she looked through a frame upon a scene that had not stirred nor changed since the moment it happened, the episode of that far-off day leaped from its burial place before her mind's eye. . . . An Indian vendor had held up before her a tray of dyed sugar sweets, in the shapes of all kinds of small creatures: birds, baby chicks, baby rabbits, lambs, baby pigs. . . . It was a very hot day and the smell in

¹¹ *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983), p. 131.

¹² Louis Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), p. 17.

the market, with its piles of raw flesh and wilting flowers, was like the mingled sweetness and corruption she had smelled that other day in the empty cemetery at home: the day she had remembered always until now vaguely as the time she and her brother had found treasure in the opened graves. Instantly upon this thought the dreadful vision faded, and she saw clearly her brother, whose childhood face she had forgotten, standing again in the blazing sunshine, again twelve years old, a pleased sober smile in his eyes, turning the silver dove over and over in his hands. (Pp. 367–68)

Given the portentousness of that childhood day, the dove might easily be merely a personal icon for Miranda inevitably associated with her brother, her youth, and the day she lost a bit of her conventional innocence. But Porter's words themselves reinforce the idea of resurrection. The memory "leaps from its burial place." And the initial vision of death, the dead rabbit which she had long ago chosen, she sees now in its "true colors." That "dreadful" vision of death now gives way to that long ago day's other vision of death, her unchanged brother holding the silver dove. The rabbit, the screw head, her brother, the day, the memory—all for her are transfigured in an unexpected re-vision of her youthful choice.

After the bleakness of unmediated existence, Miranda's vision here seemingly reconciles chaos and order, process and design, freedom and bondage, revealing each *living* moment to reflect, mysteriously, the beginning and the end, the pattern of all history, of all meaning. Thus by fusing the mythic and the personal, the past and the present, in a structure of interaction and exchange, "The Grave" first empties the ground of its original power (in this case, the Judeo-Christian interpretation of death), then restores it, re-empowering it according to the desires of the new present. The result is "neither old meaning nor meaninglessness but new meaning, meaning renewed, created now for the millionth time and the first."¹³

III

Chronologically "Old Mortality" and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" generally overlap—and thus repeat—the stories in *The Old Order*. Part I of "Old Mortality" covers the years 1885–1902,

¹³ Kartiganer, p. 13.

leaving off when Miranda is eight. Part 2, 1904, picks her up at age ten; Part 3, 1912, at age eighteen. "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," meanwhile, presents Miranda at age twenty-four. During the ten years covered by "Old Mortality" Miranda's escape from the Judeo-Christian perception into the modern is clear, while in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," as in the coda to "The Grave," she seeks to reconcile the two perceptions. Unlike in the earlier story, however, this second attempt at repetition forward either fails or, at best, remains problematic.

As Robert Penn Warren noted some years ago, Miranda in "Old Mortality" is a quester unsatisfied by any inherited truth. At the end of the story, she has found "a truth that will not be translatable, or, finally, communicable. But it will be the only truth she can win, and for better or worse she will have to live by it. She must live by her own myth. But she must earn her myth in the process of living."¹⁴ To find her own truth, however, to replace mythic memory with personal memory (her own myth), Miranda must first, to use de Man's words, "wipe out whatever came earlier." She must first demystify, demythologize, and generally deconstruct the Judeo-Christian tradition, the perceived confirming priorities of the old order, all of which "Old Mortality" encapsulates in the family myth of Aunt Amy and Uncle Gabriel.

Aunt Amy's and Uncle Gabriel's story, and thus the Gay family's sense of truth, involves the whole patterned realm of art and religion. We are told, for example, that Amy belongs to the world of poetry, that she is the heroine of a novel, and that the "romance" of Gabriel's long unrewarded love is like a story in an old book. Amy is "real" to the young Miranda as pictures in books are real. Similarly Amy is called angelic four times, a term suggested also by Gabriel's name. The family's sense of truth is, in short, romantically transcendent: "Their stories were almost always love stories against a bright blank heavenly blue sky" (p. 175).

And such is the basic sense of truth the eight-year-old Miranda has absorbed: "There was then a life beyond life in this world, as well as in the next; such episodes [as the discussion after Paderewski's concert] confirmed for [Maria and Miranda]

¹⁴ *Selected Essays* (New York: Random House, 1958), pp. 153-54.

the nobility of human feeling, the divinity of man's vision of the unseen, the importance of life and death, the depths of the human heart, the romantic value of tragedy" (p. 179). In short, despite some doubts (about the size of the family's women, say, or the absolute beauty of Amy) Miranda at the end of Part 1 accepts meaning as something transcendent, as something solidly grounded in a transhuman "life beyond life."

The extent to which she lives on such a two-fold plane is nicely illustrated at the beginning of Part 2. There the ten-year-old Miranda, before meeting Uncle Gabriel, distinguishes between "life, which was real and earnest, and the grave was not its goal; poetry, which was true but not real; and stories, or forbidden reading matter, in which things happened as nowhere else" (p. 194). So ingrained is young Miranda's double perception that she misses the irony of paraphrasing Longfellow's sentimental verse to distinguish "life" from "poetry."

Later in Part 2, however, and especially in Part 3, a series of disillusioning experiences centered on Amy and Gabriel alters Miranda's sense of truth. After having heard all her young life *the* story, Miranda finally meets one of its characters, the supposedly romantic Uncle Gabriel, now "a vast bulging man with a red face and immense tan ragged mustaches fading into gray" (p. 197). He is also drunk: "Maria and Miranda stared, first at him, then at each other. 'Can that be our Uncle Gabriel?' their eyes asked. 'Is that Aunt Amy's handsome romantic beau? Is that the man who wrote the poem about our Aunt Amy?' Oh, what did grown-up people *mean* when they talked, anyway?"

Years later, when Miranda is eighteen and returning home for the first time after her elopement, Aunt Eva continues the disillusionment, asserting that Amy was not so beautiful as the family said; that Amy was wild, indiscreet, and heartless; that Amy killed herself to escape scandal; and that all the elaborate rituals of romantic love were "just sex" (p. 216). Eva's "truth" about Amy, however, Miranda believes to be every bit as distorted as her father's idealizations. The real truth, she decides, resides somewhere outside the family and its romanticizing stories. Even before encountering Eva, in fact, Miranda has taken a large step toward rejecting the transcendent answers offered by both family and religion. Eloping—to freedom, she thinks—from the Convent of the Child Jesus, where she has

been “immured” (p. 193), she has denied both inherited answers at once, both the love stories and their bright blank heavenly blue background.

Her complete rejection of the old order, though, her rejection of all ties actually, occurs as, returning home for Uncle Gabriel’s funeral, she hears her father and Aunt Eva tell their stories. Listening, she realizes not just that their stories, that their truth, cannot be hers but that *nothing* inherited, *nothing* from outside her immediate, uninterpreted experience, can be true, at least not true for her:

Miranda could not hear the stories above the noisy motor, but she felt she knew them well, or stories like them. She knew too many stories like them, she wanted something new of her own. The language was familiar to them, but not to her, not any more. . . . She did not want any more ties with this house, she was going to leave it, and she was not going back to her husband’s family either. She would have no more bonds that smothered her in love and hatred. She now knew why she had run away to marriage, and she knew that she was going to run away from marriage, and she was not going to stay in any place, with anyone, that threatened to forbid her making her own discoveries, that said “No” to her. . . . I hate love, she thought, as if this were the answer, I hate loving and being loved, I hate it. And her disturbed and seething mind received a shock of comfort from this sudden collapse of an old painful structure of distorted images and misconceptions. (Pp. 220–21)

Gone for Miranda is the old order, the old painful structure; gone are the Judeo-Christian conceptions of life, death, and afterlife contained, for example, in Uncle Gabriel’s poem for Amy’s tombstone:

She lives again who suffered life,
Then suffered death, and now set free
A singing angel, she forgets
The griefs of old mortality. (P. 181)

What remains for Miranda, what she chooses to retain, is only the griefs of old mortality—that is, the freedom of the unconnected present, the here and now of her own experience, of herself and her own world, apparently including death:

Ah, but there is my own life to come yet, she thought, my own life now and beyond. I don’t want any promises, I won’t have any false hopes, I won’t be romantic about myself. I can’t live in their world

any longer, she told herself, listening to the voices [of her father and Aunt Eva]. Let them tell their stories to each other. Let them go on explaining how things happened. I don't care. At least I can know the truth about what happens to me, she assured herself silently, making a promise to herself, in her hopefulness, her ignorance. (P. 221)

Here in "Old Mortality," Miranda's choice, in this promise to herself, of the personal over the mythic parallels her earlier choice in the first part of "The Grave." The consequence of this choice as well generally repeats "The Grave." For in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" as earlier, the initial gaiety of her choice turns, ultimately, to despair, as the implicit "ignorance" of that choice becomes manifest. Miranda may dream of a beautiful, sufficient "nothing," but she must awaken each day to face modernity's inescapably nightmarish aspects.

Detached from the past, the mythic, and the sacred, and void also of any future, modern existence is suggested in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" by a small dance-hall Miranda and Adam frequent, a sort of present hell tightly circumscribed by the suffering and death momentarily threatened by the story's pervasive background of war and epidemic:

It was a tawdry little place, crowded and hot and full of smoke, but there was nothing better. . . . This is what we have, Adam and I, this is all we're going to get, this is the way it is with us. She wanted to say, "Adam, come out of your dream and listen to me. I have pains in my chest and my head and my heart and they're real. I am in pain all over, and you are in such danger as I can't bear to think about, and why can we not save each other?" (P. 296)

Such salvation as Miranda desires, however, requires some reconciliation, as in *The Old Order*, of the personal and the mythic—there represented by the natural rabbit and by the patterned dove, here by the promise made to herself and the promise (of an apparently Christian life beyond life) made to her long ago. In "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" both promises depend on Adam and the question of his final absence or final presence. And both promises are reflected in comments by Eudora Welty and Caroline Gordon.

IV

Why, after all, can they not save each other? Is it, as Welty says, that "there is no time . . . because tomorrow has turned

into oblivion, the ultimate betrayer is death itself"? Or do they, in fact, save each other? Does Adam, at least, save Miranda? Does the story end, in other words, in "the soul's ultimate union with God" (Adam symbolizing God), as Gordon says?¹⁵ Numerous Christian references—a seeming superabundance of them, actually—do float through the story: the work's allusive title, Adam's suggestive name, references to sacrificial lambs and healthy apples, to Hail Marys and confessions, to prayer and Sunday School, to Lazarus and resurrection. The question, though, is whether Miranda (Porter too?) can convincingly reconstruct the Judeo-Christian framework of inherited meaning within which such allusions make sense after having so convincingly vexed it in "Old Mortality." Do the references coalesce around Adam's ultimate presence or disperse at his ultimate absence? That is, does Adam's final ghostly presence—symbolizing the resurrected savior—fulfill a Christian promise made long ago, affirming her near-death vision of an afterlife (grounded repetition): "Why, of course, of course, said Miranda, without surprise but with serene rapture as if some promise made to her had been kept long after she had ceased to hope for it" (p. 311)? Or does his final absence underscore the hollow fictitiousness of all supposed meaning (ungrounded repetition)?

In the story's final two paragraphs, the interpretive crux, Miranda must choose to believe or not; she must choose between the transhuman promise made to her long ago and the personal promise made to herself. Sensing an "invisible but urgently present" ghost, "more alive than she," she nevertheless remains unsatisfied. She still clings to the self-promise made in "Old Mortality." She resists the transcendent and clings to the temporal, knowing even as she does so the "unpardonable lie" of such a "bitter desire":

At once [Adam] was there beside her, invisible but urgently present, a ghost but more alive than she was, the last intolerable cheat of her heart; for knowing it was false she still clung to the lie, the unpardonable lie of her bitter desire. She said, "I love you," and stood up trembling, trying by the mere act of her will to bring him up to sight

¹⁵ Welty, "The Eye of the Story," in *Katherine Anne Porter: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. R. P. Warren (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1979), p. 78; Gordon, "Katherine Anne Porter and the ICM," *Harper's*, Nov. 1964, p. 148.

before her. If I could call you up from the grave I would, she said, if I could see your ghost I would say, I believe . . . "I believe," she said aloud. "Oh, let me see you once more." The room was silent, empty, the shade was gone from it, struck away by the sudden violence of her rising and speaking aloud. She came to herself as if out of sleep. Oh, no, that is not the way, I must never do that, she warned herself. (P. 317)

Miranda believes, she says, but is that belief answered? Possibly. For one might interpret this passage as a coalescing of the story's pervasive religious images, generally recalling, as it does, especially the unusual phrase "I believe," the biblical post-resurrection narratives, and the difficulty of believing in a risen Christ. Desiring Adam's visible presence, Miranda quickly realizes, is not the way. Such a desire, she understands, is "false," an "unpardonable lie." She should not, as it were, seek the living among the dead. The way is rather for her to accept the transcendent meaning Adam represents. Miranda's situation seems specifically to recall Jesus' words to his doubting disciple: "Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed" (John 20:29). The allusions thus suggest that Miranda's final state is one of peaceful acceptance, even blessedness, and not of despair. Miranda now has time to rebuild and to complete her life artfully, basing it on the sure knowledge both of Adam's sacrificial love and of a future paradise, a promise fulfilled "long after she had ceased to hope for it." Interpreted this way, the story's conclusion opens not into oblivion, as Welty says, but into eternity. For Miranda the otherwise single and meaningless present moment is redeemed, as in the coda to "The Grave," by its subsumption into the eternal pattern of Christian history.

Or is it? All the pieces for such a positive interpretation are, of course, present in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider"—the references to Adam, to sacrificial death, to resurrection, and so on—but they never seem quite to come together as do the pieces in "The Grave," even though the story, the text, seems to want such a positively ordered conclusion.¹⁶ For in something of an

¹⁶ I now see as somewhat oversimplified my argument elsewhere for such a positive interpretation—"Fall and Redemption in 'Pale Horse, Pale Rider,'" *Renascence*, 39 (1987), 396-405.

obverted repetition forward, "Old Mortality" and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" repeat *The Old Order* to recover not a new possibility of meaning from Miranda's experiences but the possibility of their meaninglessness. Her thoroughgoing skepticism having upset the delicate balance of force and form, Miranda finally must face the possibility that chaos, once freed, might not be recontainable. Having once ungrounded meaning, in other words, the modern consciousness can never fully escape the doubt that any regrounding is merely a convenient fiction in the face of oblivion. And this unexorcisable doubt haunts the ending of "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" as surely as does the other ghost, threatening momentarily to dispel Adam's possible presence. Thus the final coalescence of religious references around Adam, their regrounding, remains problematic.

