

“PRACTICALLY DEAD WITH
FINE RIVALRY”: THE LEANING
TOWERS OF KATHERINE ANNE
PORTER AND GLENWAY WESCOTT

JANIS P. STOUT

“Who is not afraid? Who wants war?”
—Glenway Wescott, *Fear and Trembling*

In consecutive years at the start of World War II Katherine Anne Porter and the now little-read but then celebrated Glenway Wescott published novellas¹ set in Europe during the gathering of the storm clouds of war. The two works, Wescott’s *The Pilgrim Hawk* (1940) and Porter’s “The Leaning Tower” (1941), not only attracted their authors’ mutual praise but were the products of a mutual gestation. The two writers were friends whose correspondence reveals that both were keenly aware of each other’s work-in-progress. Wescott referred to the process through which the two novellas took form, as well as the more general relationship between himself and Porter, as a “fine rivalry.”² He might equally well have said a friendly rivalry, especially since it spurred both of them to complete works on which they had been stymied for years by their shared bane, writer’s block.

Throughout the conception, writing, and arrangements for publication of the two works, Wescott’s and Porter’s relationship had been mutually supportive and encouraging. When they exchanged congratulations upon the results, Porter called *The Pilgrim Hawk* “a beautiful thing” which she had hoped to review, and Wescott wrote to Porter that the final draft of “The Leaning Tower” was “not only all right but (it seems to me) rather godlike.”³ Yet despite the praise of a few devoted critics, neither work has been widely read. My purpose here is not only to propose that as products of artistic maturity and modernist precision they deserve to be, but that they can best be read together, as texts in conversation by writers who were themselves quite literally in conversation about their work on the two stories. Further, I

want to argue that the two works bear similarities of import as well as of form. Porter's austere novella is clearly a story of the coming of war. Wescott's has generally been labeled, in accordance with its subtitle, a love story⁴—a term that could not by any stretch be applied to "The Leaning Tower." Yet *The Pilgrim Hawk* is also, if less overtly, a story of the threat of German fascism and the approach of war.⁵

If "The Leaning Tower" and especially *The Pilgrim Hawk* have been unduly neglected, the connection between the two has been entirely ignored. That is somewhat surprising, given their closeness in time, their similarity in form, and the fact that the friendship between the two writers has been well documented. Porter's title might, indeed, be read as an oblique reference to Wescott, by way of the name of his autobiographical narrating character, Alwyn Tower.

The two first became acquainted in early 1932. After a decade in and out of Mexico, Porter had been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship and had gone to Germany in September of 1931. Her lover, Eugene Pressly, soon went on to Spain to obtain work, leaving Porter in wintry Berlin in a state of bleak depression and loneliness. In January 1932 she moved on to Paris. There she soon met Wescott, mentioning both him and Barbara Harrison (the owner of Harrison of Paris, a fine-art press) in a letter to Pressly on March 8, 1932.⁶ Harrison of Paris, operated under the direction of Wescott's lifelong companion Monroe Wheeler, would publish Porter's *French Song Book* in 1933 and her semi-fictional *Hacienda* the following year. In 1933, when Europe "began to be obviously a rat trap" (*Journals*, p. 78), Wescott, Wheeler, and Harrison returned to the United States, but remained in correspondence with Porter. They saw each other again in 1935, when Wescott, his brother Lloyd, Barbara Harrison Wescott (now Lloyd's wife), Wheeler, and their friend photographer George Platt Lynes were again in Europe for a long visit. In a letter to Pressly dated August 29, 1935 Porter described the group as "angels of light and civilised feeling and behavior." Staying on in Paris until 1936, largely because of Pressly's posting there with the State Department, Porter became increasingly concerned about German militarism as war became ever more threatening. When she returned to the United States in 1936 and, in a burst of creativity, produced the sequence of novellas that have primarily generated her reputation as one of the most accomplished of the modernists—"Old Mortality," "Noon Wine," and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider"—Wescott, Harrison Wescott, and Wheeler remained her three staunchest friends and supporters. Collectively they sought and sometimes found ways of helping her through periods of depression and unproductivity, while she in turn encouraged and assisted Wescott as he struggled to continue writing fiction.

"The Leaning Tower," which appeared in the *Southern Review* in the fall of 1941, was the first of Porter's two works that might be called fiction of the

approach of war. The second, *Ship of Fools*, the work by which she is best known among general readers, would not be published until twenty-one years later. Both grew out of her prolonged trip to Europe in the thirties, the novel primarily from her voyage from Mexico to Germany in 1931 and the novella very specifically from her stay of almost four months in Berlin, during the rise to power of the Nazi Party and Adolf Hitler. Wescott's novella, usually praised as a triumph of indirection in revealing the nuances of paired sexual relationships, is even more indirectly a triumph of foreboding about the gathering storm.

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Probably both works are sufficiently noncanonical to require summarizing.

"The Leaning Tower" opens quite specifically on December 27, 1931, six days after the arrival of the main character, Charles Upton, in Berlin and slightly over three months after the date of Porter's own actual arrival. She apparently moved the date later into the winter in order to emphasize the atmosphere of cold and darkness that prevails throughout.⁷ An aspiring but uncertain artist living on a shoestring (as Porter was), and even that little being supplied by his father in Texas (as Porter could only wish), Upton struggles against depression (much as Porter did) as he looks for affordable but acceptable lodgings. At every turn, he encounters Berliners who strike him as sneeringly supercilious or miserably poor or both. After rejecting several overpriced, dismal-looking rooms, he is shown into a stuffily over-decorated one in the home of a woman named Rosa Reichl, who lives in penurious gentility. As he stands pondering whether to take it, he carelessly picks up a plaster model of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, which shatters in his hand (as according to Porter such a model actually did in Eugene Pressly's hand as he helped her look for lodgings). Clearly, though only a cheap souvenir, the little tower was a keepsake to which the landlady attached great sentimental value. Overcome by feelings of guilt, Upton takes the room for a three-month period despite finding its shabby-genteel air oppressive. Soon he meets Frau Reichl's other boarders: a Polish pianist; an aspiring mathematician from the north of Germany, Herr Bussen, who speaks a clumsy Plattdeutsch and is looked down upon by the others; and a young student from Heidelberg who is in Berlin for treatment of a recently-acquired *mensur* scar (a mark of traditional Prussian militarism) that has become infected.

Life at Frau Reichl's proves to be as dismal as its promise. Like Porter herself, who was depressed by the "respectable, unimaginative, dumb middle-class wretchedness" she observed in her lodging and the "misery" and "distress" she saw on the streets (Letters to Eugene Pressly, January 3, 1932 and December 21, 1931), Upton feels paralyzed by misery. Like

Porter's, too, is his landlady, who bustles in and out, misarranging his papers and distracting him from his attempts to work at his art.

On New Year's Eve the four lodgers go to a cheap cabaret (presumably a version of the cabaret where Porter claimed to have met Hitler lieutenant Hermann Goering). There they celebrate by getting drunk. In the course of an extended conversation about the nations and ethnic groups of Europe, it becomes clear that the two Germans are Teutonic supremacists. Hans, the scarred student from Heidelberg, praises a woman with "silver yellow" hair as "the truest type of German beauty" and insists that "the true great old Germanic type is lean and tall and fair as gods."⁸ Predictably, he and Herr Bussen derogate every European people except their own. The conversation takes on an increasing tension until at last Hans, who has already proclaimed "power" to be "the only thing of any value or importance in this world," informs Charles Upton, "We Germans were beaten in the last war, thanks partly to your great country, but we shall win in the next" (p. 486). Chilled with foreboding, Charles reminds himself that he had better not let himself get as drunk as they do, because he "trusted none of them" (p. 488). At midnight, as the cabaret-goers sing together with interlocked arms, a brief illusion that they were all "wonderful people" (p. 493) prevails. But Charles has recognized the scarcely submerged hatred and violence all around him and can't forget it. Thoroughly uneasy, he goes to bed with a sense of hopelessness. A heavy gloom hangs over everything, the "terror of totalitarian thinking," in Robert Brinkmeyer's words, "enshrouding scene and situation."⁹

Wescott's *The Pilgrim Hawk* is also set in Europe, but with a dual time frame that sustains a tone of informed reflection or "wistfulness."¹⁰ Narrated by Alwyn Tower, an alter-ego character first used by Wescott in his second and most successful novel, *The Grandmothers* (1927), the story recalls and ponders from the vantage point of 1940 an episode that occurred somewhat over a decade earlier, in 1928 or 1929. It is the story of an afternoon's visit that begins peculiarly and ends disturbingly.

Tower, an American writer living in France, is visiting his "great friend" Alexandra Henry, also an American, at her house in the town of Chancellet when an Irish or perhaps Irish and British couple, Larry and Madeleine Cullen, arrive unexpectedly en route to Hungary in the course of a "peregrination" about Europe.¹¹ The word *peregrination*, with its evocation of "peregrine falcon," is the first of Wescott's numerous multilayered, or perhaps even loaded, terms, and the reader quickly learns that it is there to a purpose, for Mrs. Cullen carries on her gauntleted wrist a hooded falcon, or pilgrim hawk. Alexandra invites the Cullens to stay for dinner, and they all settle in to talk, mostly about the falcon. The subsequent few hours, as narrated by Tower, reveal various tensions and triangles: tension between the

Cullens, partly over the hawk and partly over their insolent Cockney chauffeur; tension between Alexandra's Italian chef, Jean, and Italian-Moroccan woman-servant, Eva, over the chauffeur's attentions to Eva, or her flirting with him; and tension within Elwyn Tower himself. Drink, jealousies, and obscure grudges culminate in Cullen's surreptitious release of the hated falcon. Madeleine is able to recover the bird, but immediately says that they must go, and they depart in their big Daimler (that is, German-made) automobile. Almost at once Tower and Alexandra hear sounds of a near-collision down the road. The car returns, and Mrs. Cullen rushes into the house in disarray, carrying a pistol, which she throws into a pond. She then tells them that her husband has had a fit of temper and brandished the gun, but whom he meant to shoot, whether herself or the chauffeur or the falcon, she doesn't know. She managed, she says, to knock his arm to one side, so that the single shot he fired went astray. The Cullens again leave. When the delayed dinner is finally served, Alexandra and Charles discuss the preceding few hours, and Alexandra conjectures that Larry probably meant to kill himself. The puzzle remains unresolved.

Equally puzzling, however, and at least equally as significant as the story we *see*, is the story we *hear* in the course of Tower's musing narrative. As Howard Moss wrote on the occasion of the book's reissue in 1968, "We are dealing with two things at once: the story Tower tells and Tower's story."¹² Tower's narrative musings examine and re-examine the afternoon a decade earlier and his own musings at that time as well as more recent events, making the context of the telling almost as real in the story as the circumstances of the events. In part, what he muses on is human freedom and enslavement. At least twice and perhaps three times (little in this story is ever clear) the hawk "bates"—that is, hurls itself off the gauntleted wrist in a futile effort at freedom. Larry's outburst of rage is also described by Madeleine as *his* having "bated," as he has threatened to do, in partial fulfillment of his many threats, at various times, to leave her (p. 119). But Madeleine, too, is a captive. At his first glimpse of her just after he noticed her hooded and tethered bird, Tower had noted that she wore inordinately high heels and "stumbled" as she walked (p. 5). That is, rather like the bird, she is hobbled. After that launch into the figurative, Tower's mind ranges widely among meanings of the entire scene. He sees the bird as "an embodiment or emblem" of fashionable people (p. 12); then, having heard Mrs. Cullen's remarks on the keen hunger of a hawk, as an emblem of human hungers of all sorts, especially the hunger for sex. "Appetite, gustatory and sexual, weighs heavily on the atmosphere" of the story (Moss, p. 140). As the bird is tied to Madeleine, Tower muses, so is a highly sexed male "captivated" by a woman, enslaved by his sexual hunger (p. 25). Yet as we perceive, though apparently Tower does not, if Larry Cullen is bound by his marriage and feels the need to "bate," Madeleine Cullen is equally tied by curious bonds—social,

financial, and emotional—to her husband. Marriage appears to be a mutual captivity.

Most elaborately, though, the bird becomes an emblem for the artist's hunger for achievement, an emblem that, as we will see, is both autobiographical and a response to the frustrations that Wescott observed in Porter. The emblematic representation of the "unsuccessful artist" is finally the most poignant of the extended meanings of the hawk, precisely because it so directly conveys Wescott's own situation and so beautifully demonstrates the honesty with which he assessed his life and work. Like a hawk whose hunting prowess has failed, the thwarted artist "ends in apathy, too proud and vexed to fly again, waiting upon withheld inspiration, bored to death" (*Hawk*, p. 24).

The hawk becomes at last an "all-embracing symbolic bird" (*Hawk*, p. 111). At the end, transported back to 1928 or 1929 and musing on the events just ended and on his own train of thought as they occurred, Tower begins to reject the symbolization of the bird and tries to think of it only as a shabby bird. But the elaborate emblematic meanings that the story has invoked cannot so easily be dissipated. They stay in the reader's mind as a hazy penumbra surrounding the peculiar actions—as apparently they have remained for Tower as well, since it is within his narrative voice as anchored in 1940 that the bird has become so all-embracing a symbol.

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Wescott had ample reason to make the emblematic linkage of the bird's imputed sense of futility to that of the thwarted artist. The 1930s were a time of creative drought for him. In publishing *The Pilgrim Hawk* he was breaking a near-silence—in fiction, at any rate—of twelve years.¹³ Celebrated in the twenties (which were also his own twenties) as a *wunderkind* among the modernists, he had lost his readership along with his productivity after *The Grandmothers* and *Farewell, Wisconsin* (1928), a volume of short stories reflecting both his midwestern roots and his participation in the Lost Generation's flight to Europe. Although that readership would later be briefly revived by the "popular and financial success" of *Apartment in Athens* (1945),¹⁴ by the time of his death Wescott could be said to have "fallen into near-obscurity."¹⁵ Feelings of frustration and self-doubt were much on Wescott's mind in the years leading up to his writing of *The Pilgrim Hawk*. With the association of the bird with the artist "hungry" for success in his or her own kind of hunt, these feelings are reflected in the work itself.

They were feelings that Wescott associated very keenly with Porter, both because he knew her similar frustration and because he had confessed to her his own. Their shared concern with the damming up of the artistic impulse appears in "The Leaning Tower" as well. Indeed, it is possible that Porter's conception of the central image specified in the title, the leaning tower (of

Pisa) itself, was intended as a sly reference to her friend's weakness. Wescott (or Tower, to use the name of his fictional alter-ego) was in danger of toppling as an artist. The two works may be, then, among other and more public things, their authors' disguised comments on each other's plight.

Porter's case of writer's block is notorious. It caused her to miss deadline after deadline and to fail to complete work after work, even when they were under contract and advances were in hand. The most conspicuous manifestation of her problem was, of course, her inordinate delay in finishing *Ship of Fools*, which she began at least by 1936, though probably earlier (initially conceiving of it as a novella) and did not complete and publish until 1962. But her production of short fiction as well entailed struggles and periods of drouth, among them the early 1940s. *The Leaning Tower and Other Stories* in 1944 was, in Joan Givner's words, a book "scraped together" by Porter's publisher "in the absence of all the promised works" she had not delivered "because nothing had been written for years."¹⁶ Wescott once told Porter that "all that had hindered" her was "livelihood, little or no livelihood" and "great lapses into weariness and sadness" (Letter to Porter, February 1, 1966). But there were other factors as well, including her own perfectionism, her volatility of spirits, and the societal disruptions of the times in which she lived.

The correspondence of Porter and Wescott bears strikingly candid witness to their mutual awareness of the problem of the drying-up of the artistic impulse and their resulting dismay. Not long before the first indications that Wescott was conceiving his story of the hawk (if indeed, as we shall see, he had not already, but unsatisfactorily, drafted it), he made rueful reference to having "nothing publishable on hand or even in immediate process" (Letter to Porter, February 8, [1939]). Porter, then living in Baton Rouge and attempting to promote Wescott's work with the editors of the *Southern Review*, with which she was closely associated through her marriage to its managing editor, Albert Erskine, suggested that he rework into a piece for the journal or perhaps a book for L.S.U. Press his planned libretto for a ballet about John J. Audubon (Letter to Wescott, November 16, 1938).¹⁷ That project did not come to fruition until much later. But when the *Southern Review* purchased another piece of work from him, a review of Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, Wescott hoped that this return to paid publication would "fir[e] his imagination" sufficiently to make him a "respectable writer-for-publication . . . again" (Letter to Porter, July 6, 1939). He wanted "nothing on earth so much as to produce a couple of fat volumes soon" (Letter to Porter, August 15, 1939). Porter felt equally thwarted. On September 5, 1939, she apologized for suggesting he send something for the journal, saying that when she received similar letters she felt only the frustration of being unable to do so because "Nothing is ready." "O Lord, how long," Wescott lamented (Letter to Porter, November 15, 1939). Having begun

addressing her as "my favorite rival" (August 11, 1939), he confessed, "I should like to challenge you to a sort of race. . . . I burn with rivalry" (Letter to Porter, December 26, 1939).

One wonders if the race Wescott meant was a race for completion of their two novellas. Not only did the periods of writing of the two overlap, though precisely to what extent is uncertain, but as their correspondence demonstrates, they wrote in keen mutual awareness.

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Porter apparently began or at least conceived "The Leaning Tower" during her four months in Berlin, in late 1931 and January of 1932, shortly before her long friendship with Wescott began. A letter that she wrote to Malcolm Cowley from Berlin shortly after her arrival, on October 3, 1931, bears a later marginal annotation in Porter's hand: "I wrote 'The Leaning Tower' and re-wrote 'The Cracked Looking Glass' here between October 1, 1931 and January 21, 1932." This annotation is perhaps the basis for Brinkmeyer's statement (p. 211) that she began the work in the early thirties. Given the unreliability of many of Porter's comments about dating, however, it is at least equally possible that she "began" the story then only in the sense of conceiving it. Whether she fully drafted, only began, or merely conceived the work at that time, we can feel confident that she and Wescott discussed it. Shortly before, in August and September of 1931, he had made an automobile tour of Austria and Germany with Wheeler, Lynes, and Barbara Harrison, in the course of which, as his book *Fear and Trembling* records, he made observations about the general postwar misery and the likelihood that boys seen along the way would become cannon fodder in the next war.¹⁸ Although Bawer finds Wescott's insertion of brief observations about the approach of another war into the "facile" context of the tour "glibly tasteless" (p. 40), the book does demonstrate that he and Porter shared, then, a concern about the political situation in Europe. This would surely have entered into their conversations, as well as their writing.

Porter's completion of "The Leaning Tower" can be dated with considerably more certainty: the fall of 1940 (Letter, Porter to Wescott, September 13, 1940). The last few months of her work on it overlapped with Wescott's on *The Pilgrim Hawk*—if we accept his crisp statement in the dedication that it was written between March and July of 1940. Yet notes in Wescott's journal as well as in letters to Porter indicate that it was begun considerably earlier. As early as May 17, 1939, after admitting to "despairing of the accomplishment of a major work of imaginative literature," he mentioned something "quite aesthetic" that he had been doing "lately" in which a first person narrative (as *The Pilgrim Hawk* indeed is) had again taken the character of Alwyn Tower. On February 7, 1940, a month before he claimed to have begun the work, he wrote, "My checkbook prompts me or reprompts

me however to rewrite the story of *The Pilgrim Hawk* for George Davis" (*Journals*, p. 63). Note, the verb is *rewrite*, not *write*. It would seem, then, that the story already existed in a relatively complete draft. In December 1940, after the book version appeared (following serialization in *Harper's Magazine* in November and December), he noted that he had been "using the hawk in the way of a metaphor" for his own "amusement, consolation, or moral self-education," if not for the actual writing of the story, ever since meeting "a lady with a falcon . . . one afternoon long ago" (*Journals*, p. 76).

If we could determine more precisely the order in which the two works were begun or the rate at which they progressed, it might be possible to gain a clearer understanding of the extent to which either of them knowingly refers to the other. Various details in "The Leaning Tower" suggest reference to Wescott and/or his story of the hawk, and it is possible that even Porter's central image and title refer to the narrating character Alwyn Tower. Porter's work, then, may have been a response to Wescott's. On the other hand, if Wescott did begin his story later, as he claimed, it may have been a response to hers. His awareness of Porter's work on "The Leaning Tower" may have prompted him to take up his fictional persona (the Tower) once again. In any event, so far as the presently known record indicates, it was in a letter dated December 20, 1939, that he first directly mentioned to her, in writing, the novella that would prove a temporary breakthrough in his career, saying that he had promised the editor of *Harper's* "a story, entitled *The Pilgrim Hawk*," which, however, he was "far from getting around to." As we have seen, the journal record demonstrates that this statement was not entirely candid.

After this December 20 reference to his having promised the story, Wescott again mentioned his work on it in letters to Porter dated March 25 and April 4, 1940. In a letter unfortunately undated but which seems to have been written about that same time, he explicitly linked his work with hers, saying, "Nothing in the world seems to me to matter except *The Pilgrim Hawk* and *The Leaning Tower*." On June 13 he wrote in his journal (p. 72), "When the *Hawk* is in order, I don't know how I'm going to be able to bear her [Porter's] relative proximity without summoning her to town or coming up to her with it in my mouth like a bird dog. (A bird dog with a hawk in its mouth?)"¹⁹ He then (or one assumes this was the order, rather than the other way around) pulled the elaborate conceit of the bird dog out of the journal and, with suitable changes in pronouns, re-used it in a letter to Porter, along with telling her that his story was "almost all on paper." The following day, June 14, Porter asked him to send her a copy of *Hawk*, saying that she was confident the *Southern Review* would take it. This was not to be. Wescott sold it to Harper's instead, at least partly because he needed to clear longstanding advances. As a result, their letters briefly took on a slight edge of irritation. But in this letter of June 14, 1940 Porter rejoiced in his breaking free of writer's block (neither of them realizing how quickly it would settle

back in) and emphasized her eagerness to see the story. On July 17, before leaving New York for the summer writers' conference at Olivet College, where Porter had gotten him invited, Wescott telegraphed her, "Hawk done." It was, he thought, "a remarkable thing" (*Journals*, p. 73). Critics have borne out his impression, praising it as his finest work.

Porter thought so as well. When the book appeared at the end of November she wrote Wescott that it was "a beautiful thing" and she was disappointed not to be reviewing it as she had expected, due to a misunderstanding of some sort (Letter to Wescott, November 29, 1940). Their attention soon shifted to the matter of publication of "The Leaning Tower." An initial contract fell through when Porter refused to accept editorial cuts designed not only to shorten the work drastically but to ameliorate her portrayal of Germans (Letter, Porter to Wescott, January 21, 1941). Wescott sprang into action, getting her the advice of a hard-boiled agent on how to extract her manuscript from the hands of the editor who had already made a payment on it. Her use of the delay as an opportunity for further revision may, however, have been beneficial. In any event, Wescott wrote in his journal on April 16, and to her on the 17th, that the result was "not only all right but (it seems to me) rather godlike." His strongest feeling, he recorded, was envy: "I envy her having written this . . . I feel practically dead with fine rivalry" (*Journals*, p. 83).

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"The Leaning Tower" and *The Pilgrim Hawk* bear a remarkable though subtle similarity, both in their employment of an emblematic technique built around a central image and in the nature of their concern with the portentous public events that were then preoccupying most Europeans and many Americans. Porter's is quite clearly and explicitly a story of the gathering storm, the approach of World War II. It gives an intensely personalized glimpse of the militancy of Germans during the time when the Nazi party was consolidating its dominance in Germany, in preparation for Hitler's January 1933 appointment as chancellor and the subsequent German conquest of all of Europe. Porter witnessed the Nazi rise to power at close hand during her stay in Berlin and at slightly greater distance, but still from a European perspective, during her years in Paris and Basel, ending with her return to the United States in 1936.

But the approach of the Second World War cannot be considered apart from heritage of the First. We see that heritage throughout the story. It is, of course, the ruination of the German economy caused by the war, and compounded by the Great Depression, that causes the hopeless poverty afflicting Berliners in general, so powerfully felt in the story. A group of cold and ragged singers Charles Upton sees on the street, "starving and blue-nosed," sing Christmas carols in the hope of collecting small change ("The

Leaning Tower," p. 441). Men "blinded or otherwise mutilated in the war," each of them "isolated in his incurable misfortune," beg on every streetcorner. Most vividly of all, a "tall young man so emaciated his teeth stood out in ridges under the mottled tight skin of his cheeks" holds a sign offering to take any work he can find (p. 441). The barber who wants to cut Upton's hair in Hitler style has a permanent cough caused by poison gas.

Much as the hawk in Wescott's novella accrues a rich aura of meanings, the plaster tower that Upton idly and thoughtlessly breaks in Frau Reichl's stuffy room becomes a symbol of the moral brittleness of German society, especially its claims to cultural richness. It is a society leaning toward war and also toward its own moral and cultural ruin, just as the tower leans. The plaster tower, a souvenir of a trip Frau Reichl once took with her long-since deceased husband, is a shrine to a dead past, irrelevant to her present reality, just as the German past of Bach and Beethoven is irrelevant to the present social ugliness. The fragility of the little tower may perhaps, too, be an emblem of the vulnerability of this brittle society to the wiles of an unprincipled strong man who exhorts starving Germans to wrap their sense of racial superiority about them and fight their way out of their misery. If it also implies that the German war machine will crumble in the hands of Americans (Stout, p. 113), those implications are left undeveloped. Like Wescott, Porter was aware of the "portentiousness [s]he flirted with" in loading such heavy symbolism onto an object (Cunningham, p. xii), and like him, she held back from making it too overt.

Fittingly, it is when Upton returns from his unsettling night of drinking with the new friends he neither trusts nor really likes that he realizes the plaster Leaning Tower has been returned to his room and placed once again on display, "patched up as it was, and worthless to begin with" but an object that "meant something" to Frau Reichl. "Perpetually ready to fall" as German militarism and ethnic pride seem perpetually ready to fall "but never falling quite," the tower memorializes a structure built with an originary flaw or error in design, "a mistake in the first place." The mistake is a moral one, a mistake in an entire people's conception of itself and its relation to the rest of the world. But whether this flaw in the design means an associated weakness in power is far from clear. In his alcohol-dulled state, Upton can't quite think what the souvenir reminds him of, but manages to associate it with the overdecorated architecture he sees outside his window and "something perishable but threatening" in the atmosphere all around him (pp. 494-95).

"The Leaning Tower" is as inconclusive in its ending, then, as *The Pilgrim Hawk*, with its sense of violence stewing under the surface and ready to break out in indeterminate ways. Upton's friends' discourse at the cabaret on the characteristics of different national types in Europe—all, of course, seen by the Germans themselves as inferior to Germans—is paralleled by a recurrent awareness of national types in *The Pilgrim Hawk*: impulsive

Italians, mysterious Moroccans, insufferable English, subtle French, crooked Hungarians, and always the patriotic, perpetually warring Irish. Mrs. Cullen includes in her recital of the miseries she has seen in her life the starvation of "Irish republicans hiding from the Black and Tans" (*Hawk*, p. 23). Porter's novella also includes a discursus on the Irish, whom the Polish Tadeusz considers "'nearly as damnation patriotic as the Poles'" but whom all agree to have become, as a result of their long struggle with the British, "just a lot of wild bog-jumpers" ("The Leaning Tower," pp. 484-85). One wonders whether this strangely emphatic passage was impelled by Porter's response to the Irish preoccupations of *Pilgrim Hawk*.

Another pervasive parallel between the two works is their concern with hunger. We have seen the traces of famine in "The Leaning Tower," evident in the people Charles Upton sees all about him, and the preoccupation with the hawk's hunger, paralleled to intense human hunger, in *The Pilgrim Hawk*. But Wescott, too, makes a linkage of hunger with the aftermath of war, the same linkage Porter makes so insistently. Twice in the text, once in Madeleine Cullen's indirect discourse and once in Tower's thoughts, starvation is associated with "Germany in 1922" (p. 23)—that is, with the economic distress that led to widespread despair and the rise of Hitler, as witnessed by Porter in 1931 and glimpsed in "The Leaning Tower."

To be sure, Wescott's *Pilgrim Hawk* does not announce itself as a war story as "The Leaning Tower" does.³⁰ References to war are fleeting and seemingly incidental. Even so, I maintain that the book should be read by reference to war and the genre of war literature. Impending war was the context of its writing and of Alwyn Tower's narrative speaking ("now the forties have begun"), and though the story being told is placed in the late 1920s the traces of that context and of the backward-looking narrative perspective pervade the text. Because of the two vast ordeals that stood before and after, the twenties and thirties became indelibly defined as a between-the-wars period. Wescott's novella is an early participant in that defining process, and we necessarily understand the entire work by reference to its bracketing by these historical cataclysms. "May of 1928 or 1929," as the time frame is defined in the opening paragraph, not only was midway between the two wars but was explicitly, in terms of the story, a time "before we all returned to America" (p. 1). The motivation for that return is not stated, but we know that Wescott's own return was motivated by the approach of war. It was a time, one might say, leaning toward the next war.

The presence of the impending war in *Hawk* may be light, but it is palpable. The story of the tense married and unmarried couples is teasingly suggestive of wider meanings. Wescott alerts us to the figurative potential of the Cullens with a pair of direct pointers in the second and third paragraphs, where the air one sensed in Europe in that time is said to have included "the various war and peace that goes on *in the psyche*" (p. 2;

emphasis mine). In the woods where hunting horns sounded in those days, “perhaps there have been anti-aircraft guns for the defense of Paris embedded all amid the earths of foxes” (p. 2). These cues, along with the pointed indicator of time—“now the forties have begun”—instruct us to read with the coming war in mind.

Thus cued, we may find significance in the pan-European cast of characters and their “peregrination.” All Europe, it seems, is on the move—as it was, of course, during the wars. The putatively Irish Mrs. Cullen, at the center of the afternoon’s tensions, seemed to feel the presence of “some trouble impossible to ignore” and, like the story itself, spoke “with a kind of continuous double meaning” (p. 20). A discussion of the hawk’s hunger and whether the bird’s human admirers can assess such hunger by inference from their own prompts Mrs. Cullen’s reminder that she had seen starvation such as that of the “Germans in 1922” (p. 23)—that is, in the aftermath of war, which led to the social turbulence that incubated the next war. The narrator concurs: he too had been “in Germany in 1922.” If one supposes humanity has learned how to avoid such calamities as widespread starvation, one had better think again. “So at least it seemed in the twenties,” the narrator observes (p. 25). But apparently it does not seem so now, in the forties.

The correspondence between Wescott and Porter during the period when he was working on *The Pilgrim Hawk* and she was working on “The Leaning Tower” indicates how much the coming war was on their minds. On March 23, 1939, Wescott wrote—breaking off his remark significantly—“I haven’t any idea what steps to take personally when the war begins, if . . .” On August 31 of that year he reported “fiddling with the radio” to get news of “where we are at in our endeavor against that horrible great man H.” On September 5 Porter replied with anxiety about “all the uproar of millions of men being marched here and there” and “billions of dollars being spent” on arms. “Twice in one lifetime is too much.” She closed this letter by expressing “an extraordinary premonition of disaster”: she heard “the steady sound” of the “iron hooves” of evil.

On June 13, 1940, in the same letter in which he referred to bringing his “hawk” to her in his mouth, like a devoted dog, Wescott spoke of suffering from personal *malheurs* “as well as the war” and repined over how he and “perhaps our whole world” used to imagine peace “generally spread . . . all over everything and everywhere,” but no more. Like his alter ego Alwyn Tower, he looked back a decade and saw how (comparatively) impervious to the impending disaster he had been. Five days later, in a long letter full of fear and misgiving about his own betrayal of pacifist principles as he began to entertain the inevitability of entering the war against the Germans, Wescott abruptly switched to the new work: “The Pilgrim Hawk is a remarkable thing if I do say so myself.” He began to fear, he said, fascism creeping into his own thinking. Six months later, Porter thought the editor who had eviscer-

ated "The Leaning Tower" "rather more than Nazi-ish in her leanings" (Letter to Wescott, January 21, 1941). Through January and February 1941 the letters are occupied with the publication problems of "Tower" after Porter refused to allow it to be published in eviscerated form, as well as with Porter's discovery of the house near Saratoga Springs, New York, that she purchased and began remodeling. But the letters remain occupied, too, with the war. On January 9, 1942, Porter wrote, "Well, the War [meaning U. S. involvement in it] was a month old yesterday and a thriving young monster." Worry about the war and worry about the completion and publication of the two masterful novellas were intertwined. This was also the period when Wescott was thinking of Porter with "rivalry" (Letter to Porter, December 26, 1939)—in a sense, their private war.

Wescott later referred to his 1945 novel *Apartment in Athens*, perhaps punningly, as his "war work" (Bauer, p. 43). Porter's "Leaning Tower," which might well have been titled "Apartment in Berlin," was assuredly her "war work," or approach-of-war work. But Wescott's *The Pilgrim Hawk* was a work of war as well—conspicuously so in the social and personal tensions from which it emerged and more subtly in its content. The stories are a pair. Similar in their conceptions and form and in their sharing of the technique of spinning out a central image until it takes on a penumbra of meanings, the two novellas provide an unusual instance of texts in conversation, written by authors who were themselves in conversation as they put them on paper.

NOTES

- 1 Disliking the term *novella*. Porter would have said short novels or long stories.
- 2 Glenway Wescott, *Continual Lessons: The Journals of Glenway Wescott, 1937-1955*, ed. Robert Phelps with Jerry Rosco (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1990), p. 83.
- 3 Katherine Anne Porter to Glenway Wescott, November 29, 1940; Glenway Wescott to Katherine Anne Porter, April 17, 1941. All letters quoted or referred to here are among the Katherine Anne Porter Papers at the University of Maryland—College Park. They are quoted by permission of the University of Maryland and either Barbara Thompson Davis (Porter's literary executor) or Anatole Pohorilenko (Wescott's literary executor). A Porter scholar who has read "The Leaning Tower" carefully, Thomas Austenfeld, regards it—contrary to Wescott's judgment—as "curiously 'unliterary'"; Austenfeld, *American Women Writers and the Nazis: Ethics and Politics in Boyle, Porter, Stafford, and Hellman* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 2001), p. 22. Robert K. Miller, however, terms it "richly textured"; Miller, "Katherine Anne Porter and the Economics of Concealment," in *From Texas to the World and Back: Essays on the Journeys of Katherine Anne Porter* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian Univ. Press, 2001), p. 213.
- 4 For example, Ira Johnson, *Glenway Wescott: The Paradox of Voice* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1971), p. 113.

- 5 William H. Rueckert, in *Glenway Wescott* (New York: Twayne, 1965), p. 114, implicitly excludes the possibility of considering *The Pilgrim Hawk* a product of the war by labeling as works that "World War II . . . shocked Wescott into writing" the two Alwyn Tower stories after *Hawk*, along with *Apartment in Athens*.
- 6 Anatole Pohorilenko slightly errs, then, in saying that they met in the summer of 1932: Pohorilenko, "The Expatriate Years, 1925-1934," *When We Were Three: The Travel Albums of George Platt Lynes, Monroe Wheeler, and Glenway Wescott, 1925-1935* (Santa Fe: Arena Editions, 1998), p. 84.
- 7 Janis P. Stout, *Katherine Anne Porter: A Sense of the Times* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1995), p. 111. Also, Thomas Austenfeld, "Katherine Anne Porter Abroad: The Politics of Emotion," *Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 27 (1994): 27-33.
- 8 Katherine Anne Porter, *Collected Stories* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1965), p. 481.
- 9 Robert K. Brinkmeyer, *Katherine Anne Porter's Artistic Development: Primitivism, Traditionalism, and Totalitarianism* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1993), p. 213.
- 10 Michael Cunningham, "Introduction" to *The Pilgrim Hawk* (New York: New York Review Books, 2001), p. xiv.
- 11 Glenway Wescott, *The Pilgrim Hawk* (1940: rpt. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968). Pohorolenko (p. 69) identifies the house as a representation of Barbara Harrison's country house near Paris.
- 12 Howard Moss, "Glenway Wescott: Love Birds of Prey," *New Yorker*, 1967: rpt. as "Afterword," *The Pilgrim Hawk* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968), p. 130.
- 13 Pohorilenko attributes Wescott's inability to produce during the 1930s to the fact that he "increasingly found himself to be the odd man out" in his love triangle with Monroe Wheeler and George Platt Lynes, and sees the "subtle triangularity" of *The Pilgrim Hawk* as a trace of "the eventual incorporation" of Lynes into "his and Monroe's lives" (pp. 268, 72).
- 14 Jerry Rosco, "An American Treasure: Glenway Wescott's *The Pilgrim Hawk*," *The Literary Review* 31 (1988): 140.
- 15 Bruce Bawer, "Glenway Wescott 1901-1987," *The New Criterion* 5 (9): 45 (1987).
- 16 Joan Givner, *Katherine Anne Porter: A Life*. Revised Edition (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1991), p. 339.
- 17 Interestingly, at the time Porter was writing to Wescott about his Audubon libretto she was herself writing an essay published by *Vogue* in 1939 as "Audubon's Happy Land"—another evidence of the mutuality of their literary imaginations.
- 18 Glenway Wescott, *Fear and Trembling* (New York: Harper, 1932).
- 19 Reading the correspondence with Porter alongside Wescott's journals, one repeatedly encounters duplicate phrases indicating that he mined the one for the other.
- 20 Wescott's reference to his 1945 novel *Apartment in Athens* as his "war work" (Bawer, p. 43) may, indeed, lead one to believe that he did not conceive of *The Pilgrim Hawk* as belonging to the same category, textual evidence to the contrary notwithstanding.