Katherine Anne Porter and her publishers

Alexandra Subramanian

College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd

Part of the American Literature Commons, and the History Commons

Recommended Citation

https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-vzkq-gq53

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
KATHERINE ANNE PORTER AND HER PUBLISHERS

A Dissertation
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of American Studies
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Alexandra Subramanian
2001
This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Author

Approved, April 2001

Susan V. Donaldson
Cam Walker
Jacquelyn McLendon
Nancy Gray
Darlene Harbour Unrue
Department of English
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I. HELPMATES AND HANDMAIDENS: EDITORS, AGENTS, AND THEIR AUTHORS</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II. “TANGLED TOGETHER LIKE BADLY CAST FISHING LINES”: KATHERINE ANNE PORTER AND HER HARcourt, Brace FAMILY</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III. “THE CREATIVE MIRACLE, THE CREATIVE HORROR”: KATHERINE ANNE PORTER, SEYMOUR LAWRENCE AND “THAT WHOLE EXTRAORDINARY EPISODE OF SHIP OF FOOLS”</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER IV. “AN ANGEL OF ALL THE VIRTUES”: EDITOR AND AGENT, CYRILLY ABELS</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PREFACE

This study focuses upon Katherine Anne Porter’s relationships with her literary agent, Cyrilly Abels, and with her editors, Donald Brace and Seymour Lawrence, who were associated with Harcourt, Brace and Atlantic-Little, Brown respectively. The volume of correspondence between Porter, her agent, and various employees at Harcourt, Brace, the Atlantic Monthly, Little, Brown, Alfred A. Knopf and Dell/Delacorte Press (Seymour Lawrence was affiliated with Knopf and Dell/Delacorte after his departure from Atlantic-Little, Brown) is remarkable and includes over six thousand pieces of correspondence including letters, notes, wires, and cards.¹ This approximation does not include Porter’s abundant correspondence over the years with other various publishing houses, magazines, and literary agencies. In his introductory comments to Max and Marjorie: The Correspondence Between Maxwell E. Perkins and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Rodger L. Tarr helps put into perspective the extraordinary volume of Porter’s publishing correspondence. Tarr writes that the total number of correspondence between Perkins and Rawlings written between 1930 and 1947 amounts to “698 located letters, notes, and wires.”² Perkins and Rawlings, according to Tarr’s calculations, must have

¹ This number is based upon a microfilm count of Porter’s correspondence with Cyrilly Abels and with employees at Harcourt, Brace. It also includes Porter’s correspondence with Seymour Lawrence and other employees affiliated with the Atlantic Monthly, Little, Brown, Dell/Delacorte Press, and Alfred A. Knopf. Since the Papers of Katherine Anne Porter are on microfilm, this number is based upon the number of frames counted. I counted manually Porter’s correspondence with Lawrence while he was at Knopf, because I did not want her earlier correspondence with the house counted. The number of microfilm copies came to 5,949. This number does not include the additional correspondence between Porter and Seymour Lawrence in the Seymour Lawrence Collection. This collection is not on microfilm and so was not counted, but it contains a number of pieces of correspondence that are not included in the Papers of Katherine Anne Porter. The Cyrilly Abels Collection closely replicates the Cyrilly Abels correspondence in the Porter Papers. I thank Beth Alvarez and her graduate assistant, Jessica Ford Cameron, for counting the microfilm and giving me a good estimation of the volume of Porter’s professional correspondence.

communicated an average of once a week for seventeen and a half years. He claims that the size of the collection is “astonishing, even when compared to other Scribner writers of the period, such as Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald.” Tarr’s comments make the impressive Rawlings-Perkins correspondence seem tame when compared with the mass of Porter’s business communications. It is difficult to imagine the number of hours Porter must have spent at her typewriter composing letters to agents, editors, and publishers beginning in the 1920s and continuing on until the 1970s, when the writer was in her eighties. Porter’s professional correspondence constitutes a valuable segment of the Papers of Katherine Anne Porter housed in the Hornbake Library at the University of Maryland. I have also drawn upon the Seymour Lawrence Collection and the Cyrilly Abels Collection, both housed in the Hornbake Library.

The wealth of information about Porter’s publishing history contained in this rich archive is at the center of this biographical study. While literary biographers usually provide valuable information about an author’s professional associations with agents and publishers, the limits of time and space preclude them from focusing extensively on this subject. The bonds of friendship and loyalty that developed between Porter and those persons most intimately connected to her creative life were so vital to her creative journey and so time-consuming that an individual study of these author-editor/agent bonds is warranted.

Porter’s first long-term affiliation with a major publishing house was with Harcourt, Brace. Porter signed contracts with the house in 1930, and she remained with the house until the death of her editor and publisher, Donald Brace, in 1955. Donald Brace was Porter’s main contact at the house, but when he became ill, Porter relied
heavily upon other employees at the firm assigned to attend to her affairs. Unfortunately, many of Porter’s letters to Harcourt, Brace employees are missing. I believe these letters are in the Harcourt, Brace archives in Orlando, Florida. On two separate occasions, I have tried to obtain these letters, but the attorneys I have communicated with at Harcourt, Inc., in Orlando claim that they find the prospect of reviewing Porter’s archive too daunting.

After the death of Donald Brace, Porter sought out new publishers and signed with Seymour Lawrence and Atlantic-Little, Brown in 1955. She remained with Atlantic-Little, Brown until 1964, during which time she finished her best-selling novel, Ship of Fools (1962). When Seymour Lawrence left Atlantic-Little, Brown in 1964, Porter followed him, and the dénouement of their mutually dependent alliance is vividly revealed in the Papers of Katherine Anne Porter and in the Seymour Lawrence Collection at the University of Maryland.

The abundant correspondence between Cyrilly Abels and Porter is a testament to their mutual devotion to one another as much more than professional associates. Abels was the managing editor of Mademoiselle in the 1950s. She would solicit fiction and nonfiction pieces from Porter, who was willing to put aside work on her novel to write for the magazine because she always needed money to supplement the advances she received from publishers. When Abels became a literary agent in 1962, Porter retained her and they enjoyed a fruitful alliance until Abels died in 1975. Porter chose to work closely only with people whom she trusted implicitly to handle her affairs; her faith in Abels never wavered. Their alliance illustrates how important it was for Porter to develop bonds of friendship and loyalty with those persons connected with her writing.
In my “Introduction,” I include the background information necessary for understanding the nature of the writer’s creative and personal struggles discussed throughout the dissertation. Chapter one, “Helpmates and Handmaidens: Editors, Agents, and their Authors,” familiarizes the reader with author-publisher/agent relationships historically, so as to provide a context for Porter’s close professional ties. The remaining chapters are the heart of the story. Chapter two and three trace Porter’s alliances with Harcourt, Brace and Atlantic-Little, Brown. Chapter four concludes the dissertation with analysis of Porter’s enduring professional friendship with Cyrilly Abels.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My advisor, Professor Susan V. Donaldson, has generously given her time and expertise to this project from its inception. She patiently read numerous drafts and offered valuable comments and editorial suggestions. I am also grateful to Professors Jacqueline McClendon, Nancy Gray, and Cam Walker for reading, editing, and commenting on the manuscript.

Dr. Ruth Moore (Beth) Alvarez, curator of the Papers of Katherine Anne Porter, pointed out that no scholar had ever written comprehensively about Porter and publishers. At first I thought that the topic she suggested might be boring, but I am indebted to Beth because I have loved this topic and have since learned that nothing about Katherine Anne Porter is boring. I would also like to thank Beth for sharing with me her vast knowledge of Porter, her friendship, and her wonderfully positive attitude.

I am also indebted to Professor Darlene Harbour Unrue for serving as my outside reader. It has been a privilege to work with a scholar who knows Porter so well and is able to put my work into the broader context of the writer’s long and complicated life. I thank Professor Unrue for sharing with me her fascinating insights; her support has been invaluable.

I wish to thank Karen Veselits for sharing her knowledge and insights. She has been a voice in the wilderness, a friend who understood first-hand the nature of the long and lonely dissertation writing process.

I am grateful for the support I have received over the years from my parents, Dare and Themistocles Michos. Their passion for learning has been inspirational and contagious; they have nurtured my liberal arts education in ways that extend far beyond...
their wise decision to encourage me to attend Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. I am also grateful to my aunts, Suzanne Dater and Mary Taylor, and to Dr. Roy Willis for their advice, hospitality, and encouragement. I also thank Jayanthi, Amma, and Naina, for their unwavering support.

Finally, without my husband’s joyful spirit and devotion, this project would have been immeasurably more difficult. Raju encourages me every day to put my heart into all endeavors. During the past four years, he has been there for me, dancing me through times of discouragement and frustration. He has helped in ways that extend far beyond his contribution to formatting the dissertation.
ABSTRACT

This biographical dissertation focuses upon Katherine Anne Porter's relationship with her literary agent, Cyrilly Abels, and her editors and publishers, Donald Brace and Seymour Lawrence, who were associated with Harcourt, Brace and Atlantic-Little, Brown respectively. The study is based upon the thousands of pages of correspondence between Porter and her professional associates housed in the Papers of Katherine Anne Porter at the University of Maryland. Porter's professional alliances are placed within the context of nineteenth and twentieth century publishing history and within a long tradition of idiosyncratic author-editor/agent dependencies that can be traced throughout American literary history.

The heart of the dissertation includes in depth analysis of the writer's intimate and complex professional friendships with Donald Brace, Seymour Lawrence, and Cyrilly Abels. Porter became dependent upon her publishers for financial and emotional support. The writer's publishers strengthened her artistic identity and offered loyalty and continuous support. At the same time, they demanded the loyalty of their valued client, and they exerted powerful control over her creative agenda. Porter sought to please her publishers for personal as well as practical reasons. For three decades, she struggled to meet their demand that she unnaturally transform herself from a brilliant short story writer into a novelist. In trying fruitlessly to fulfill their expectation, her financial indebtedness to them grew steadily; she experienced years of frustration, anxiety, and despair, contributing to an arduous creative journey marked by prolonged silences. Gradually, Porter developed an extreme resentment, even hostility, toward her publishers, especially after she discovered that she had unknowingly relinquished all of her literary
rights and controls to them. She discovered the hard way that the complete trust she had put in her publishers had been misguided. She would have been wise to employ the services of an agent early on in her career, but she mistakenly believed that agents were superfluous and would only interfere with the author-publisher bonds she wished to cultivate. By the time Porter finally chose to work with an agent whom she trusted implicitly, Cyrilly Abels, it was too late in her career to make a practical difference.

Katherine Anne Porter experienced the publishing world as intimate, familial, and nurturing and also as competitive, results-oriented, and mercenary. The contradictions within this world made it difficult for the writer to navigate, as her inner world of imagination and creativity were profoundly at odds with the practical aspects of profits, losses, contracts, and deadlines. Ironically, the writer's inability to distance herself from her editors and publishers encouraged her complete cooperation with them, so that she participated actively in her own artistic incarceration.
KATHERINE ANNE PORTER AND HER PUBLISHERS
INTRODUCTION

An analysis of the voluminous correspondence between Katherine Anne Porter (1890-1980) and her editors and publishers reveals that these business alliances influenced the writer profoundly and helped to shape and define her creative agenda. In particular, Porter’s publishers influenced a brilliant short story writer to persevere in her attempts to become a novelist, even after that pursuit had become inordinately painful, a creative journey that in her weaker moments she regretted. Beginning with her first contract to write a novel for her publishers at Harcourt, Brace in 1930, the pressure for her to complete a novel was unrelenting until she finally published *Ship of Fools* in 1962.

Porter scholars including Janice Stout and Robert Brinkmeyer have spoken of the writer’s dedication to becoming a novelist as integral to her identity as an artist and as tied to her aim, in Stout’s words, to “earn the respect of the (predominantly male) literary establishment” and the “adulation of a numerous reading public.” While it is true that Porter was ambitious to write a novel and that her efforts to write one began in the early 1920s, the influential role that her publishers played in ensuring that the writer never abandon the novel as a genre has been underestimated.

Porter was aware that publishing a novel would relieve her financial worries and earn her publicity and a wider readership, over time she became highly

---


critical of publishers for making their professional associations with short story writers subject to a writer’s promise to deliver a novel. Short story writers including Porter’s literary friends Eudora Welty and James F. Powers confronted a publishing establishment that devalued short fiction and routinely rejected books of short stories.\(^3\) Short stories were not considered marketable enough, and the pressure for short story writers to transform themselves into novelists in order to get published was constant and difficult to resist.\(^4\) While Harcourt, Brace agreed to publish a book of Porter’s short stories, *Flowering Judas*, in 1930, they did so because the writer had already established a fine reputation in elite literary circles and because she contracted with them to write a novel. Porter well knew that her value to her publishers and their continued investment in her was contingent upon her agreement to deliver a novel.

As the years passed and Porter was unable to fulfill her promise, the pressure surrounding her efforts to complete the novel became ever more painful and humiliating. Porter scholars including Darlene Unrue, Thomas Walsh, and Janice Stout agree that Porter was temperamentally unsuited to writing long fiction. Darlene Unrue has described the novel form as “alien to her nature and method of writing, which she described as working at top speed between long intervals of dryness.”\(^5\) Porter moved frequently and often taught or lectured to make a living. Neither her lifestyle nor her

---


artistic temperament suited her well to completing long writing projects requiring a sustained and disciplined effort.

Porter was aware of her problem with writing novels and said so in a letter to literary friend Glenway Wescott in 1940: “Truth is, I am a writer of short stories, and when this novel got simply too much for me, I lightly jumped off the track and did something I can do, and a good thing.” While Porter understood that her true genius was as a short fiction writer, she was also acutely aware of the reality that the quality of her alliances with publishers was contingent upon her promise to deliver a novel. The writer’s manifold difficulties with fulfilling their ambitions for her would prove exhausting, even embittering, and Porter would eventually develop a deep-seated resentment toward publishers.

At the heart of her resentment was a recognition that publishers tried for commercial reasons to pressure natural and gifted short story writers and poets into becoming novelists. In bringing art into the commercial realm of profits and losses, Porter perceived artists as being reduced to “assets” and “properties.” While she wanted and needed to earn money as much as the next writer, her deepest personal feelings were of dismay and disillusionment when she observed artists being pressured to turn away from their true areas of talent in order to meet what she called the “artificial demand” of publishers. Thus while Porter was enamored by the idea of being touted as a successful novelist and was compliant with her publisher’s strategy to turn her into a one for reasons

---

6 KAP to Glenway Wescott, September 30, 1940, Papers of Katherine Anne Porter, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries, cited by Walsh 205. All items quoted from the Papers of Katherine Anne Porter, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries will hereafter be abbreviated as KAP Papers. 7 See “Eudora Welty and A Curtain of Green” in Collected Essays 288; Porter not only resisted yoking art and commerce, but she also, according to Darlene Unrue, was “particularly firm on the distinction between art and propaganda or between art and works that make a moral point.” See Darlene Harbour Unrue, ed.,
that will be explored, there was a part of her that simultaneously resented the unforgiving pressure to deliver to her publishers the one literary commodity that for them determined a client’s true value.

It would require more than thirty years of obsessive persistence and prodding before Porter’s second major publisher, Atlantic-Little, Brown, would finally extract a novel from the writer. Throughout those years, there were times when Porter was motivated to change publishers. On each occasion when Porter threatened to leave she was confronted with fierce opposition. Either her publishers argued that she would betray them if she left without delivering a novel, or, once she had written a successful novel, they argued that they could not willingly let her go because she was considered too valuable an asset to release without contingencies. Porter viewed their covetous attitude toward writers as “valuable assets” as degrading, and these experiences only fueled her sense of outrage regarding business strategies that she regarded as mean-spirited and mercenary. She came to believe that “publisher and writer are simply each other’s necessary curses: one cannot exist without the other, and that is a drastic condition at best in any human enterprise.”

In her later years, Porter often expressed a firm desire to have no publisher at all.

While from the 1950s on Porter was apt to articulate a scathing critique of publishers, she had developed early on in her relations with publishers a pattern of becoming strongly bonded to individual editors whom she was eager to please. In

---

“*This Strange, Old World*” and Other Book Reviews By Katherine Anne Porter (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1991), xxix.

8 KAP to Peter Davison, March 28, 1965, KAP Papers.

9 In one of her frequent moments of frustration with publishers, Porter expressed her feelings this way: “I tell you plainly, I could wish I had no publisher at all!” (KAP to Cyrilly Abels, November 5, 1964, KAP Papers).
particular, she developed strong bonds of friendship and loyalty with Donald Brace of Harcourt, Brace & Co. and Seymour Lawrence of Atlantic-Little, Brown. Porter came of age as a writer during an era when publishers still operated businesses that were relatively small, familial operations. Editor Jason Epstein describes the publishing ethic and the atmosphere of houses like Random House and Alfred A. Knopf in his memoir, *Book Business: Publishing Past Present and Future*, in which he recounts a half a century of working in the industry:

> In the 1950s book publishing was still the small-scale, highly personal industry it had been since the 1920s when a remarkable generation of young men, and a few women, many of them Jews who were not welcome in the old-line houses, broke with their genteel predecessors and risked their personal fortunes and the disapproval of their elders by aggressively promoting the literature and ideas of modernism.¹⁰

Epstein remembers the 1950s with nostalgia.¹¹ Many of the radical publishers from the 1920s, including Bennett Cerf and Donald Klopfer of Random House, still headed their firms as dignified professionals when Epstein was starting out as an editor. He clearly laments the ways the industry changed in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when so many established houses were bought out by conglomerates and transformed by corporate America. Prior to the 1960s, many publishing houses were “decentralized, improvisational, personal,” and, according to Epstein, editorial duties in these houses were “best performed by small groups of like-minded people, devoted to their craft,

---


¹¹ In his chapter “Goodbye to All That,” Jason Epstein laments that the “talented young men and women who had started their firms in the 1920s and introduced the literature of modernism to American readers by risking their fortunes and their destiny on Faulkner and Joyce, Proust, Gide, Lawrence, Stein, Stevens, and Pound would soon be gone, and so would their highly personal, hand-crafted publishing styles” (Epstein 93).
jealous of their autonomy, sensitive to the needs of writers and to the diverse interests of readers."\textsuperscript{12}

André Schiffrin, managing director at Pantheon for thirty years and more recently director of the New Press, expresses a similar nostalgia about the industry whose transformation he regrets bitterly. He observes that until “quite recently, publishing houses were for the most part family owned and small, content with the modest profits that came from a business that still saw itself as linked to intellectual and cultural life.” Commenting on the present state of publishing, he claims that in recent years most publishers see themselves as either “purveyors of entertainment or of hard information,” leaving “little room for books with new, controversial ideas or challenging literary voices.”\textsuperscript{13}

In choosing to publish with Alfred Harcourt and Donald Brace, Porter situated herself within a firm whose founders were dedicated to publishing writers like Porter who were talented but not necessarily profitable. Although Porter resented the bias among publishers against books of short stories, she nevertheless thrived within a publishing world where firms operated as the kind of intimate, extended families that Epstein and Schiffrin remember as intellectually nurturing for both authors and editors. Jason Epstein, for instance, describes his offices at Random House during the 1950s, located in the old Villard mansion at Madison and 50\textsuperscript{th} Street, as “a second home for authors as well as for ourselves.”\textsuperscript{14} Given the nature of the publishing business during the writer’s

\textsuperscript{12} Epstein 1; for another first-hand account of the atmosphere at Random House, see Bennett Cerf’s \textit{At Random: The Reminiscences of Bennett Cerf} (New York: Random House, 1977).

\textsuperscript{13} André Schiffrin, like Jason Epstein, is nostalgic about changes in the publishing industry since the 1950s. See André Schiffrin, \textit{The Business of Books: How International Conglomerates Took Over Publishing and Changed the Way We Read} (London: Verso, 2000), 7.

\textsuperscript{14} Epstein 5.
quarter century tenure at Harcourt, Brace, it is not surprising that Porter became a part of the firm's extended family, having formed intimate friendships over the years with many editors and employees.

Porter's desire to earn the respect and devotion of her editors and publishers, along with her expectation that she be treated as family, was not unusual. Many editors and publishers were likewise proprietary about their friendships with authors. Epstein explains: "A regular army lives in the barracks. Guerilla armies live amid the people who sustain them and for whom they struggle. So do book publishers." Donald Brace is an example of a publisher who became very covetous of his alliance with Porter; he supported her for years, even when she was producing very little for him to publish. Brace was intent upon securing her loyalty to Harcourt, Brace, and she, in turn, became dependent upon him over time. For many years, Porter strove to maintain the strength and exclusivity of her close association with Donald Brace.

In her efforts to earn the approval and support of her publishers, Porter made decisions that forced her to forfeit her artistic autonomy. In promising to deliver a novel, she relinquished her freedom to write in accordance with her inspiration and in the genre of her choice, beholden to no one. Her decision to please her publishers even when her intuition told her to do otherwise exacted a personal cost. The years she spent on and off trying to work on the novel contributed to numerous episodes of debilitating stress and creative paralysis that lasted throughout and beyond the most productive years of her writing life.

---

In addition to coping with the constant pressure to deliver a novel, Porter was also drained by the number of hours she spent on professional correspondence. Porter interacted with her publishers directly. She chose not to take advantage of the knowledge, negotiating ability, and financial benefits a shrewd agent would have provided until very late in her career, and even then she would not allow her agent, Cyrilly Abels, to interfere with the loyalty she felt toward her editor and publisher, Seymour Lawrence. Instead, Porter chose to handle all correspondence and negotiations with her editors and publishers. She had come to depend upon them in a multitude of ways, and she did not want an intermediary to interfere with the bonds that she developed with them.

In refusing the services of an agent, Porter showed an unreasonable amount of loyalty toward her publishers, and she also demonstrated that she was out of step with the times. Jason Epstein points out that at Random House during the 1950s many of the writers who developed close friendships with their editors also employed agents to handle the prickly issues associated with signing contracts. The writers who employed agents to help them with managing the business side of their writing lives were less likely to argue with their publishers later on because their agents had looked out for their best interests and shielded them from entering into business agreements that might prove disadvantageous in the long run.

Without the representation of an agent, Porter lost countless hours composing letters wherein she tried to influence the business strategies of her publishers. An agent

---

16 Epstein 6; Maxwell Perkins was typical of an editor capable of maintaining close alliances with authors who also had agents. F. Scott Fitzgerald, for example, worked with Harold Ober, and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings worked with Carl Sandburg. Both writers felt much closer to Perkins than to their agents. Perkins
might have saved Porter from these endless and time-consuming exchanges regarding problems that she did not always understand and was powerless to change. Her editors and publishers were shrewd enough to take advantage of Porter's reluctance to hire an agent. They felt that they could motivate their client and prevent her from switching publishers if she felt indebted to them both personally and financially. It would be misleading to imply that her publishers did not develop genuine affection and concern for their client's welfare as a human being and as a writer. Yet as devoted as they were to Porter, they never lost sight of the reality that their solicitousness and personal investment in her were predicated upon ensuring loyalty and obtaining manuscripts. Their actions were thus inspired both by true feelings of affection and the knowledge that their efforts were good for business.

Porter's editors were therefore able to separate their admiration and affection for their client from their business objectives. Porter, on the other hand, trusted her editors implicitly as personal advocates and as trustees of her professional affairs. Her life was inextricably tied to her publishers because she had signed contracts with them, the most important of which was for a novel, and because she needed them financially, she accepted advances from them and was continually in debt to them. Porter was therefore beholden to them creatively and financially. She accepted both the helpful and the suffocating aspects of these alliances because, on a human level, she became dependent upon her editors as close personal allies; they became important to her artistic identity, and she came to depend upon their constant interest in her work and their steady stream of practical and emotional support. Porter was unable to draw clear boundaries between

in fact often advised his authors about how to manage their agents. See Tarr; also see A. Scott Berg's Max Perkins: Editor of Genius (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978).
her editors as dear friends and advocates and her editors as business partners. She would have to endure some bitter episodes wherein she felt betrayed by her publishers before she would understand the implications of her decisions to put her trust in men who were accountable not just to their authors but to the financial advisors at their firms. Their divided loyalties necessarily meant that their support of authors, however fervent, was conditional, as much as Porter wanted to believe otherwise.

The letters between Porter and her editors and publishers reveal more than information about the complex dynamics between author and editor and the ways that Porter handled her professional affairs. Porter was particularly open with her editors; she confided in them as she might with close family members. She discusses with her editors her long battles with creative paralysis and writer’s block. In addition, she shares her thoughts and feelings ranging from the joy she found in the natural world around her to her battles with melancholy, anxiety, frustration, and despair. Her letters are at times melodramatic, deeply pessimistic, and often desperate in tone. They are also repetitive in theme and content. They illuminate the emotionally harrowing internal struggles of a woman who was at various times conflicted, anxious, suspicious, self-recriminating, and vulnerable. Alternatively, she was spirited, hopeful, philosophical, and compassionate. Not surprisingly, this mercurial woman was both enchanting and challenging to deal with for friends and business colleagues alike.

In their entirety, these letters reveal a woman tormented by her shortcomings and often on the brink of giving up her struggle to write and live. Time and time again, she remained true to her calling as a writer; she refused to allow the darker side of her nature to prevail. We see her penetrating insights regarding human failings in the parade of
predominantly unsavory characters walking the decks of the *Vera* in *Ship of Fools*. To finish a novel that reflects the writer’s troubled personal experiences as well as the historical events that shaped her thinking, including two world wars and a failed revolution in Mexico, she had to summon all of her inner fortitude. Her letters document how hard she struggled to create those brief moments when she could work productively.

Many of the writer’s most celebrated stories were created during those brief intervals when Porter was holed up in an inn where she was able to rest and quiet her mind. In those rare, tranquil moments when she had managed through the help of friends or publishers to seclude herself from the world and keep her internal demons at bay, Porter was able to free her mind and spirit long enough to tap into the unconscious reservoir of memory and experience that fertilized the humanity and genius of her stories.\(^\text{17}\) It is because of the brilliance of her stories and the reputation that they gave her as one of the nation’s best writers that one is inspired to understand the nature of those interminable “silences,” to use Tillie Olsen’s words, that marked her creative journey.\(^\text{18}\)

It was when she was truly writing at her best, “at top speed” as she was fond of saying,
that she was truly happy.19 These letters between an author and her publishers and agent fill in the mysterious and lengthy intervals between Porter's infrequent bursts of creativity. Although Porter may have been silent creatively, she was never silent when it came to her publishers with whom she shared confidences and acrimonious wars of words. Because her professional friends were always the ones most concerned with her productivity, her letters show us firsthand her pleas for their assistance and the explanations she gave for her creative "silences." We therefore view, almost voyeuristically, the tumultuous inner psychological terrain of an artist who wanted so much to write but who, for months and years at a time, kept her impatient publishers waiting, often fruitlessly.

In his book, Katherine Anne Porter and Mexico, Thomas Walsh's discussion of Porter's troubled family life and battles with depression sheds light upon the writer's struggles with productivity. In addition, his insights help us to discern why Porter was attracted to her editors as men who supported and sustained her in remarkable ways that transcended her practical and professional needs. Walsh's discussion of Porter's battles with depression, exacerbated by having lost her mother at an early age and her father's inability to cope with his grief, helps us to understand the writer's deep-seated need to feel wanted and admired by those persons most closely linked with her vocation as a fiction writer. Walsh observes that Porter was aware of her problems with depression and that her self-awareness "might have persuaded her to seek professional help, yet there is no evidence that she ever did and considerable evidence that she should have."20 Porter may not have sought professional help, but her letters to her editors, publishers and

---

19 Stout 259.
20 Walsh xiv.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
other employees with whom she worked closely reveal that she was apt to share her most personal and painful struggles with them, sometimes providing alarming accounts of her state of mind and circumstances. At times, she positioned her professional associates as therapists. What she wanted and needed from her publishers was practical support, usually money, but her way of pleading with them was through personal revelations.

Donald Brace and Seymour Lawrence were publishers, not trained therapists. But as Janice Stout points out about Seymour Lawrence, and it is true of Donald Brace to a lesser degree, these men were “remarkable practical psychologists.”21 They could not and did not solve her problems in the way a good therapist might have, and Porter’s same difficulties were therefore painfully repeated throughout her life. But they did function in the role of therapist to the extent that they never rebuked or rejected their valued client. They genuinely hoped her circumstances and her state of mind would improve, and to help her along they performed a therapeutic role as patient listeners. In their frequent communications with her, they buoyed her spirits and offered her advice about how she might manage her schedule, free herself from constant distractions from friends, or handle volumes of mail. In addition, they supplemented her finances within limits and, especially after she earned money with her best-selling novel, they acted as financial advisors. Their gentle albeit sometimes desperate reminders about her contractual obligations were usually padded by soothing words of encouragement and reassurance. And importantly, they never openly expressed doubts about her ability to complete a project, but instead they offered her a kind of support and admiration that was constant and seemingly unconditional.

21 Stout 208.
Although she was not prolific, her publishers were willing to live on hope that she would give them more to publish. Porter was considered a valuable literary commodity and promised to embellish the trade list of any literary house ever since the publication of one slim volume of short stories, *Flowering Judas*, issued under the imprint of Harcourt, Brace in 1930. While Donald Brace and Alfred Harcourt may not have believed that Porter would bring them immediate profits, they published in an era when writers were valued for their cultural capital and for the profits that they might bring to a firm in the long run. Publishers knew that finding a best-selling writer was rare and difficult to predict, so they invested in writers whom they believed would be profitable additions to their backlists. These were books that often were not profitable initially but that over time could be relied upon to bring in a steady income year after year. Jason Epstein explains that “[i]t was these books that proclaimed a firm’s financial strength and its cultural standing.” A firm’s backlist was therefore “a source of pride which more than compensated the owners and their staffs for the marginal profits and low wages typical of the industry.”\(^\text{22}\) Alfred Harcourt and Donald Brace could be assured that Porter was an author who would contribute to the firm’s “cultural standing.”

While it is not difficult to understand why Porter’s editors and publishers extended themselves to create close bonds with Porter, it is more difficult to discern why Porter became so dependent upon them. As scholars have noted, Porter’s strained and unloving relationship with her father can in part explain her choice of men and her tumultuous affairs and marriages.\(^\text{23}\) This father-daughter relationship also sheds light on

\(^{22}\) Epstein 19.

\(^{23}\) Stout 170, 171; Walsh 100; also see Joan Givner, *Katherine Anne Porter: A Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 49-51.
the way she handled her professional friendships and why she showed greater fidelity toward her editors than toward her husbands and lovers.

Porter maintained long-term professional alliances and resisted the temptation to jump from one house to another because her publishers insisted upon, even demanded, her loyalty. They offered her the kind of constancy and financial and emotional support that she was never able to obtain from her father. Her editors and publishers at Harcourt, Brace and Atlantic-Little, Brown wanted Porter to enhance the prestige of their lists, and she needed to be wanted. For this reason, she personalized her business relationships, in part because it suited her psychologically to believe that her editors were devoted to her for reasons that were not only professional but also deeply personal. Her relationships with editors were comfortable, moreover, because there were never fears that her friendships would evolve into complicated romantic alliances. The kindness, gentility, and proper distance that Porter’s publishers provided, and their willingness to play gentleman to the lady, filled a need in Porter to be supported, encouraged, and respected, especially because she never was able to forgive her father for his inability to show her any of these qualities.

Porter’s mother died shortly after giving birth to her fifth child when Porter was only two years old, depriving Porter of the love, constancy, and support that a devoted mother would have provided. As Thomas Walsh points out, Porter’s father was already melancholic, and after his wife’s death he was extremely depressed. Many of Porter’s memories of childhood are of his overwhelming grief and of his inability to take over the responsibilities of parenting or providing for his family. The family moved into his mother’s small two-bedroom house in Kyle, Texas. Porter’s grandmother was a strong
authority figure and disciplinarian who took care of and provided for the family until her death when Porter was eleven years old. Porter’s memories of her father’s inability or unwillingness to care for his family haunted her, but perhaps more hurtful and damaging was her recollection that her father blamed his children for his wife’s death and wished the children had never been born.\(^\text{24}\) According to Porter, he felt that his children were “an immense and bitter burden to him,” and she described her father as “quite indifferent to my fate or my living” during “the very critical years of my life.”\(^\text{25}\) Janice Stout points out that, in addition to telling his children that they were responsible for their mother’s death, “he practiced the additional cruelty of showing favor [among the three girls] to whichever one looked prettiest at the time.” Stout then observes that his treatment of Porter, then called Callie, can easily be linked to her “anxieties about her appearance and the insecurity of male love.”\(^\text{26}\)

Porter’s alliances with men and her vacillating desire for and rejection of human contact led to a series of love affairs and failed marriages. Her sense of grounding and stability was derived, not from any personal ties, but from her decision to put first her identity as a writer; she was determined not to let anyone interfere with the practice of her art. When she began to blame one of her husbands, Eugene Pressly, for standing in the way of her productivity, for example, she used this logic as an excuse for divorcing him. Thomas Walsh observes that, by defining herself “first and foremost as an artist,” she was able to buoy herself up “during fits of depression.” In addition, putting her identity as an

\(^{24}\) Walsh xiv; Stout 170.
\(^{25}\) KAP to Albert Erskine, March 8, 1938, KAP Papers, cited by Stout 5.
\(^{26}\) Stout 171.
artist before everything else allowed her to justify her "behavior in failed human relationships."\textsuperscript{27}

Walsh also observes that Porter used her father as a negative example to motivate herself to succeed in her own life. She was deeply hurt by his unwillingness to recognize her potential, and she was embittered by his rejection and neglect. In a letter written to her sister Gay in 1932, we see that she clung to her anger, expressing her dismay that he literally let us go to rags and almost to death without making one reasonable attempt to pull us out of the hole we were in after Grandmother's death. I shall go to my grave mystified toward his whole attitude toward us, toward life—so deathlike and despairing and inert and will-less. I too have these seeds of despair and lack of will, and I know the signs when they come. . . . we are all equipped to be hopeless failures.\textsuperscript{28}

Porter was clearly worried that she had inherited her father's tendency toward depression and feared that his example set his children up to fail in their lives.

In her notes, Porter wrote about her determination not to repeat her father's behavior. She did not want to give in to any tendencies she might have to live either apathetically or irresponsibly. During the time when she was trying to write a biography of Cotton Mather, a project she found unwieldy and never was able to finish, she examined her conscience and tried to link her inability to discipline herself with her childhood:

The bad habits of my father and the grown ups that brought me [up] have corrupted me and are about to spoil my life. . . . I failed to criticize with discrimination or rebel against the really damaging conditions. I was romantic and egotistic, and took naturally to the examples of laziness, inefficiency and arrogance I saw about me. Now let me take myself in hand . . . and do my work to the limit of my capacity, without the preoccupations of vanity and fear. I am corrupted also with the egotistical desire to be right always and to fear criticism. I have thought too much about my career ever to buckle down and make one. Root 

\textsuperscript{27} Walsh xiv.
\textsuperscript{28} Gay Holloway Porter to KAP, January 30, 1932, KAP Papers, cited by Walsh 168; also see Givner 51.
of this trouble, a false point of view in those who influenced me in my childhood, my own romantic acceptance of those views, and failure to train myself in habits of concentration and finishing one job before I undertook another. This has destroyed my health, my nervous system, and almost destroyed my vital contacts with reality.

Here we see that early on in her writing career Porter was already alarmed by the ease with which she lapsed into periods of "laziness," "inefficiency," and "arrogance." She vowed to take herself "in hand" and to "train herself in habits of concentration" so she would finish one job before beginning another. Although she had not yet established a long-lasting and committed relationship to one publisher, she was already aware of her difficulties with completing projects. Porter would be unable to fulfill her contract to write her Cotton Mather biography in time to please Horace Liveright, her current publisher. Harcourt, Brace would eventually buy out her Mather contract and would make other contractual agreements with her. Donald Brace and Alfred Harcourt did not imagine that in close to twenty-five years of working with Porter she would be unable to finish her novel, and they would only publish three slim volumes of short stories and a book of collected writings. Donald Brace would learn quickly that he was trying to coax into productivity a woman whose life was often in crisis and who suffered frequently from nervous exhaustion and bouts of melancholy.

Porter brooded about her father's rejection and her unhappy childhood throughout her life, and she complained to friends about the "great cureless suffering at the very root of my life." In a letter to her father, she reminded him of their past and wondered "if we would any of us recover from our peculiar despair of poverty, that chained feeling we have that we have no money, can never by any chance get any, and can't move hand or

---

29 KAP, notes, February 27, 1928, KAP Papers, cited by Walsh 112, 113.
foot until we do get some.”\textsuperscript{32} Porter was humiliated by her family’s reduced circumstances, and we see traces of the self-consciousness she felt as a child in stories like “The Grave,” wherein the ladies of the town make little Miranda feel improper and self-conscious about her tomboy attire.\textsuperscript{33}

The writer’s attitudes about money were shaped by her memories of deprivation and gloom and by her reminiscences of a proud and respected grandmother who, despite her struggles to support a young family, “represented the possibility of claiming a patrician heritage.”\textsuperscript{34} Porter did not learn frugality from her early experiences; she did not learn how to manage money at all, and her troubles with managing her finances made her life immeasurably more difficult. When Porter did earn money from teaching, lecturing, or writing, she was apt to fritter it away on clothes, furniture, or jewelry, items that enhanced her beauty and befitted her “patrician heritage.” Shopping for beautiful things lifted her spirits and gave her the sense that she was briefly free or, to use her words, “un-chained.”\textsuperscript{35} An imprudent shopping spree, while it may have briefly assuaged her nerves and made her forget her troubles, created even more turmoil for Porter. The joy of spending money was usually followed by feelings of anxiety and humiliation when she could not pay her bills. Obtaining more advance money from her publishers,

\textsuperscript{30} Donald Brace to KAP, January 5, 1934, KAP Papers.
\textsuperscript{31} KAP to Paul Porter, December 4, 1948, KAP Papers, cited by Stout 185.
\textsuperscript{32} Qtd. in Walsh 150.
\textsuperscript{34} Stout 6.
\textsuperscript{35} In a letter to one of her editors at Harcourt, Brace, Catherine Carver, Porter describes some antiques she has acquired. Although she as usual cannot afford to spend extravagantly, she explains that she is “tired of the wastefulness of spending good money on the dull mean things of life, and I mean to have a shining margin of lovely extravagance to balance it!” (KAP to Catherine Carver, dated All Saints, 1954. KAP Papers). It is interesting to note that Porter was shopping during a very unhappy stage of her life. She was more often than not either ill, very depressed, or both while living in Liège, Belgium. Porter was undoubtedly using shopping as a means of distraction and escape.
moreover, only reminded her of her sparse productivity and made her feel as if she lived in a state of peonage.

Her financial problems were compounded by her frequent bouts with pneumonia and bronchitis, stemming from having lived through two serious illnesses in her twenties. She had tuberculosis in her early twenties and then had a very near brush with death during the influenza epidemic that swept the nation in 1918. Her recovery was miraculous and intensified her determination to make something of her life.\textsuperscript{36} Porter promoted her books and enhanced her reputation during her many lecture tours and during her semesters teaching at colleges. Although she earned money that she desperately needed from teaching and lecturing, her schedule was usually socially demanding and taxing physically. She often collapsed with upper respiratory illnesses, and the medical bills she incurred were substantial and likely to wipe out her earnings.

Although many of Porter's lifelong financial and emotional problems can be traced to her painful relationship with her father and the void left by the loss of her mother, Porter was nevertheless able to use these experiences to develop a sense of purpose and an ambition to live an extraordinary life. Her success was astonishing considering that her education was extremely limited and that beyond grammar school she spent only a half a year at the Thomas school, a secondary school in San Antonio, Texas. She was, according to Darlene Unrue, exposed to some classical literature in the country schools that she attended and by some of the tutors that her grandmother brought

\textsuperscript{36} The experience of illness also enabled her to see that she was different and had to live her life in her own way. In an interview with Barbara Thompson, she says that her brush with death during the influenza epidemic "simply divided my life, cut across it like that," and made her realize that she was unusual: "Now if you have had that, and survived it, come back from it, you are no longer like other people, and there's no use deceiving yourself that you are." See Barbara Thompson's "Katherine Anne Porter: An Interview" in Joan Givner, ed., \textit{Katherine Anne Porter: Conversations} (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), 85.
to the house as boarders. Porter said that from the age of twelve to twenty "her favorite writers were Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Emily Brontë, Montaigne, Rabelais, Chekhov, and Henry James." \(^{37}\) Janice Stout comments on the remarkable job Porter did educating herself, observing that her "intellectual achievement and her influence . . . when placed against the bald facts of her insecure early life and her limited formal education, present one of several major puzzles of her life and career." \(^{38}\)

Despite her achievements, a sense of personal failure and "defeat" is expressed throughout the pages of correspondence she wrote to her publishers, since they reminded her continually of her unfulfilled obligations. Their reminders weighed upon her frazzled nerves, and her ever-increasing debts to them were a sign of failure and an intolerable burden. Porter often spoke about the "vicious cycle" of her life to her publishers. Her description was apt. Her life was a web of unmet deadlines, out-of-control finances, dramatic and emotionally devastating romantic alliances, and health problems, all made worse by pressure from publishers and growing indebtedness.

Often in her letters we meet a woman deeply troubled and unable to change patterns of behavior that were destructive and debilitating to her creativity. In a letter to one her husbands, Albert Erskine, she reflected upon the "miracle" of being able to create and of the burden of waiting for her melancholy to pass so that she could. "I feel pretty well today," she wrote,

and with some kind of pleasant excitement stirring within me, usually preliminary to a burst of work. They do come, as you say, something like a succession of miracles, but I would like to have a little more control and continuity. But I believe, after trying a long time to understand myself and practice the kind of discipline that would work for me that these curious alternating periods of lassitude and unwillingness to go ahead, with the strange melancholy, and then

\(^{37}\) Unrue, Katherine Anne Porter's Poetry 7.

\(^{38}\) Stout 15.
the equally strange energy and a kind of happiness in spite of it all, come out of some psychological imbalance, and I must simply try to live with it and take advantage of the upward swing.\textsuperscript{39}

Porter was never able to achieve the kind of “control and continuity” that to her represented a disciplined mindset that she admired but lacked. For the reason that Porter did write only sporadically when she was on an “upward swing,” her substantial contractual obligations to publishers did not make practical sense. Her dislike of publishers and all that they represented, which amounted to financial peonage and creative incarceration, makes the devoted alliances she formed with individuals like Donald Brace and Seymour Lawrence that much more mysterious and worthy of consideration. These literary alliances hold the key to a more complete understanding of an arduous creative journey marked by long silences and small miracles.

\textsuperscript{39} KAP to Albert Erskine, October 26 (undated), KAP Papers.
Chapter One

Helpmates and Handmaidens:
Editors, Agents, and their Authors

Historically, editors and agents have understood the artistic visions of their writers, but they have also served as helpmates and handmaidens to some of the most celebrated American writers from Nathaniel Hawthorne to Thomas Wolfe, William Faulkner, and Eudora Welty. Burroughs Mitchell, editor for thirty years at Charles Scribner's Sons, explains, in part, why when he describes

the act of writing [as] a lonely one. In fact, a writer lives in a peculiar and contradictory condition. He treasures his independence (sometimes to the point of egomania); he values the times of solitude necessary for his work. And yet it is often a troubled solitude, and it can grow so painful that there must be relief. That is what the editor can provide more satisfactorily, perhaps, than anyone else.¹

The theme of the alienated writer is a cliché. If one reads about the dependencies that exist between writers and their editors and agents, however, it is clear that many writers throughout literary history have looked to their editors and agents to perform much more than their traditional duties. Many writers seek trusting relationships with professionals willing to give of themselves in ways that cannot be calculated. These literary professionals help writers by providing a reliable and constant support system that continually renews the writer's confidence and sense of purpose. Editors at their best are also, according to Scribner author Marcia Davenport, able to “evoke in people of talent
the best that they had in them; the ability to get out of them better work than they otherwise did.”

In more recent years, owing to the corporate and impersonal nature of publishing houses, agents have often replaced editors in performing many of the personal services authors require. One can almost talk about the interpersonal responsibilities of agents and editors interchangeably, since many agents have replaced editors in their roles of confessor, confidant, and practical advisor.

Revered Scribner editor, Maxwell Perkins, captured the multiple roles editors and agents have played historically. John Wheelock, his colleague at Scribner’s, remembers when Perkins “burst out laughing in desperation”: “What sort of madhouse is this anyway! What are we supposed to be—ghost-writers, bankers, psychiatrists, income-tax experts, magicians?” Perkins was rightfully dismayed at the multiple roles he was expected to play, especially in his prominent position as head editor at one of the oldest and most respected publishing houses in the United States. In another incident, a Scribner writer called Perkins in a panic, exclaiming: “My cat, John Keats, is dying—you must send a veterinary,” and, when advised to get one in the neighborhood, inquired: “Will you pay for it?” Perkins, fulfilling his “editorial responsibilities,” paid the bill.

---

2 John Hall Wheelock, ed. Editor to Author: The Letters of Maxwell E. Perkins (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1979), xv.
3 James L. West III explains that agents eventually began to function very much the way editors had functioned: “They answered mail, secured books and research materials, performed errands, renewed copyrights, and assisted authors with their tax returns. Indeed, the functions of the editor and the agent eventually became almost identical, and many persons moved easily from one position to the other.” See James L. West III, American Authors and the Literary Marketplace Since 1900 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 99.
4 Wheelock 4.
5 Wheelock 4.
Jason Epstein describes the lengths to which Bennett Cerf and Donald Klopfer of Random House went to satisfy the various needs of an unprofitable genius, William Faulkner:

It was well known that for years Bennett and Donald had supplied Faulkner with money, paid his overdue household bills, pleaded with his Hollywood employers to raise his screenwriters salary, nursed him through his love affairs, his drunken nights, his hangovers, his falls from horses he insisted on riding, and tried, not always successfully to keep his books in print when few people wanted them. This act of faith cost both time and money. Bennett and Donald had an aversion to chaos in their own lives and cannot have enjoyed nursing their exotic genius through those drunken nights. Had these publishers been motivated by a desire to make money, they would have abandoned this “exotic genius.” In doing so, they would have also forfeited the eventual profits they earned once Faulkner found an audience among the reading public.

These kinds of anecdotes help us to situate Porter’s professional friendships within the context of a long history of author-editor intimacies characterized by phenomenal dependence and idiosyncratic demands and behaviors. If we examine Porter’s professional relationships while keeping in mind how her predecessors and contemporaries related to their editors, we may be better equipped to judge the nature of her own expectations and disillusionments. Most writers were not as even-tempered and genial as Eudora Welty was when dealing with her professional associates. A glimpse at the eccentricities of Porter’s fellow writers will, perhaps, enable us to examine her professional relationships critically but at the same time compassionately, keeping in mind the writer’s melancholic nature, the occupational hazards of her chosen vocation,

---

6 Epstein 86.
and what close literary friend, Glenway Wescott, described as her "deadly lonesomeness."  

An examination of prominent nineteenth-century publishers will shed light on the publishing philosophies of Porter's editors and publishers, Donald Brace and Seymour Lawrence. Henry Holt and Walter Hines Page held firm beliefs regarding their professions that helped to shape and define the roles of editors and publishers well into the twentieth century. During the nineteenth century, established and reputable publishers considered intimate and friendly author-publisher alliances essential to the health and reputation of their houses. In the early years of the twentieth-century, Henry Holt and Walter Hines Page reminisced fondly about the ways strong author-publisher bonds had been integral to the integrity and success of their businesses. Their view of publisher-client relations was fundamental to their entire philosophy of publishing, which for Holt and Page was based upon the lofty notion that, as publishers of good and moral books, they were performing the highest public service. Good books, they believed, were "among the greatest benefactors of society."  

---


8 Publishing historian Charles Madison writes that if “publishing has not been, at least until recently, highly rewarding financially, it has been one of the most dignified and gratifying pursuits—truly an occupation for a gentleman. One of the delightful by-products of publishing is warm friendships with authors. Henry Holt's intimacy with many of his 'clients' yielded him vastly more satisfaction than his considerable financial gain.” See Charles Madison, The Owl Among Colophons: Henry Holt as Publisher and Editor (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966), x.

9 Walter Hines Page, A Publisher's Confessions (New York: Doubleday, 1905), 169; see also Henry Holt, "The Commercialization of Literature," Atlantic Monthly, (November 1905); in a follow-up article in Putnam's Monthly, Holt discusses agenting in more detail. See Henry Holt, "The Commercialization of Literature: a Summing Up," Putman’s Monthly (February, 1907): 563-75. Gerald Gross explains that out of the “ethos of social Darwinism and the Industrial Revolution” emerged the “individual publisher” of the nineteenth century: “He carried on personal publishing when that type of publishing was at its peak. In short, he believed in what he published. Thus, his personal character was symbolized in the books on his list and the honesty of his relations with authors and his publishing colleagues. The two were inextricable.
Holt and Page believed strongly that good books were not the product of publishers more concerned with profits than quality. Rather, they were the product of publishers who adhered to the ethical principles of the profession and cultivated and nurtured writers throughout their careers. Henry Holt, for example, was a strong proponent of the "courtesy of the trade principle," which in essence meant that once an author published with a particular house another publisher would not try to lure the writer away with an offer of more money.\textsuperscript{10} According to Holt and Page, the practice of haggling over authors corrupted the integrity of the publisher, exhibited an excessive spirit of commercialism, and was ultimately damaging to both authors and publishers.

When publishers engaged in the practice of bidding for authors, according to Holt, then they reduced the profession to the level of "stockbrokers," and the more authors "marketed their wares as the soulless articles of ordinary commerce are marketed, the more books tend to become soulless things."\textsuperscript{11} Once books were reduced to the level of any other commercial commodity, then authors, publishers, and ultimately the reading public suffered, because inevitably the books published would be considered more for their commercial appeal than genuine merit. Both Holt and Page abhorred this prospect and sought to influence their fellow publishers and writers to refrain from engaging in activities that they believed degraded authors and publishers alike.

\textsuperscript{10} Charles Madison explains that the "courtesy of the trade" principle came into fairly wide acceptance some years prior to the Civil War "as a means of eliminating cut throat competition": "It assumed that the publisher who first announced his interest in a foreign book had priority to it; to establish this priority he had to possess a copy of the work. Violation of this principle was frowned upon by reputable publishers" (Madison, \textit{The Owl Among Colophons} 21).

\textsuperscript{11} Holt 578.
In his *Confessions of A Publisher*, everything in Page’s entire being rebels against competition and commercialism because for Page publishers, like preachers, are called to their work, and the publisher’s responsibility to his author represents a sacred commitment. That commitment is at times described in marital terms; author-publisher alliances are thus referred to in a language that implied lifelong fidelity. Holt, for instance, advises that an author should seek an alliance with a publisher “with whom he should be identified all his days.” Should a writer decide to auction his books to the highest bidder, Page warns, he risked becoming a sort of “stray dog” of the publishing world: “He has cordial relations with no publisher; and his literary product has really declined. He has scattered his influence and is paying the natural penalty.” Page implies that monogamy and fidelity to one partner are preferable to scattering one’s influence, or “seed.” Writers, in short, should ideally be brought into houses as family members. It was hoped that they would remain loyal to their publishing families and would grow into maturity and old age with one partner/publisher in a secure and nurturing environment. Page therefore argues that it is in a writer’s best interest to choose loyalty to a “real publisher,” who is “not a mere businessman . . . [or] salesman” but a man who will perform his “highest duty” to his authors by providing to them a “personal service . . . as the physician does for his patient or the lawyer for his client.” It is not, he declares, merely a “commercial service.”

---

13 Holt 580.
14 Page 16.11
15 Page 17, 57, 55, 68.
Page’s publishing philosophy was grounded in his belief that publishers needed to distinguish themselves from ordinary businessmen. If they failed to treat their authors as treasured clients, then their businesses might succeed monetarily in the short term. As representatives of a noble profession, however, they would have made themselves examples of “demoralization and commercialism with a vengeance.”¹⁶ In their rush to acquire authors unscrupulously, they would forfeit their ability to earn respect and loyalty from the best writers. “From one point of view,” he explains, the publisher is a manufacturer and salesman. From another point of view he is the personal friend and sympathetic advisor of authors—a man who has a knowledge of literature and whose judgment is worth having. A publisher who lacks the ability to do this high and intimate service may indeed succeed for a time as a mere manufacturer and seller of books; but he can add little to the best literary impulses or tendencies of his time; nor is he likely to attract the best writers.¹⁷

Throughout his Confessions, Page argues passionately that publishers must bring character and integrity to a profession that requires sensitivity toward writers, most of whom, he says, want “advice,” or at least “sympathy.” The publisher unwilling to “frankly talk or write” about a manuscript for which he will provide “sympathetic suggestions” will, in his view, be unable to “hold the confidence of his best writers.”¹⁸

The integrity and ultimate success of the publishing profession, as Page envisions it, therefore depended upon trust, fidelity, and productive and friendly exchanges between authors and publishers. When publishers failed to honor these alliances, then they hurt

---

¹⁶ Page 66; Publishing historian Donald Sheehan explains that publishers of during the era of Page and Holt considered themselves as guardians of the trade's morality, as intermediaries between “immortals and the ordinary world” bent upon stemming the tide of commercialism. The advent of increased commercialization, these old-fashioned publishers believed, would inevitably “divest the business of its character of public service” (see Donald Sheehan, This Was Publishing (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1952), 6.
¹⁷ Page 70, 71.
¹⁸ Page 70.
their own chances for long-term success, and they defiled the profession. Those publishers who "would try to win [a writer] away" from another publisher performed a "trick unworthy of the profession" and hurt the "real publishers" who invested "our money, our goodwill, our work, our experience, our advice, our enthusiasm, in him and his future." "Real publishers," on the other hand, performed a spiritually uplifting service to society when they served the interests of promising writers. Page sums up his publishing philosophy:

A good book is a Big Thing, a thing to be thankful to heaven for. It is a great day for any of us when we can put our imprint on it. Here is a chance for reverence, for something like consecration. And the man or woman who can write a good book is a form of capital infinitely more attractive than a large bank account or a great publishing "plant." Yet, if we regard the author simply as 'capital,' we are not worthy to serve him. The relation leads naturally to a friendly and helpful attitude. We know something about the public, that no author is likely to know. With this knowledge we can serve those that write. And with our knowledge of the author and of his work, we can serve the public.

The firm of Ticknor & Fields, which by 1849 was on its way to becoming the most highly regarded house in publishing, was renowned for establishing strong publisher-author relations, and both William Ticknor and James T. Fields were among the publishers who established the standards for the profession that Page and Holt would later idealize. Ticknor and Fields brought out books by prominent European and

---

19 Page writes that when "authors begin to regard publishers as mere business agents, and publishers to regard authors as mere "literary men" with whom they have only business relations, the beginning of a decline has come" (Page 56).
20 Page 166.
American authors, and their cultivation of author-publisher alliances provided a foundation for their success as highly regarded and ethical publishers.  

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s relations with his publishers, James T. Fields and William D. Ticknor, provide us with an example of one of the closest and most intimate professional bonds in publishing history.  

James T. Fields visited Hawthorne when he was a discouraged and embittered writer, having had very little financial success with *Twice-Told Tales* and feeling discouraged because he believed that the publishing industry had been taken over by a “d—d mob of scribbling women.” Hawthorne believed that he “should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with that trash.” Although Hawthorne was feeling insecure, defeated, and resentful toward female authors, he reluctantly showed Fields a manuscript that the publisher had spotted on his desk. Fields read the manuscript and responded with generous praise. His suggestion that Hawthorne omit the short stories and concentrate on making “The Custom House” into a novel resulted in the publication of *The Scarlet Letter*, a novel that sold well and bolstered Hawthorne’s confidence as a writer. From this point on Hawthorne developed relations with Ticknor and Fields that publishing historian Charles Madison describes as “an ideal collaboration between author and publisher.” In approaching Hawthorne when he was “at his lowest ebb of literary discouragement,” Fields was able to inspire this writer to rework his material and to produce a literary classic.

---

22 See W.S. Tryon, *Parnassus Corner: A Life of James T. Fields, Publisher to the Victorians* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963); also see “How the Great Houses Began” in Tebbel’s *Between Covers* 21-63.
24 Qtd. in Madison, *Irving to Irving* 10.
Caroline Ticknor described the bond between her father and Hawthorne as one “of closest and continuous intimacy, from the beginning of their acquaintance, when the shy and retiring author began to depend on his alert and executive publisher for all manner of services, up to the very end.”\textsuperscript{26} Caroline Ticknor highlighted her father’s intuitive capabilities when she writes that he “supplied just what Hawthorne lacked and understood precisely what was needed before the other asked it.” Ticknor’s son commented that, although Hawthorne was capable of handling many of his practical affairs,

what he needed, sought, and kept was a friend stronger and more expert in practicality even than himself, to whom also he could confide upon occasion his personal thoughts, his professional hopes, and his fancies and criticisms in regard to literature and aesthetics. Nowhere else, not even in his journals, was Hawthorne so frank as in the many intimate letters which he sent to his confident from abroad.\textsuperscript{27}

Madison explains that while Fields was “Hawthorne’s editor and close friend, Ticknor became his intimate personal companion and generous publisher.”\textsuperscript{28} The more Hawthorne grew to trust Ticknor, the more he relied upon him for almost everything that related to his daily affairs, including keeping his accounts, paying his bills and buying his cigars.

In addition, Hawthorne increasingly disliked traveling alone, and Ticknor was easily persuaded to travel with him. Ticknor seemed proud of Hawthorne’s dependence when he declared that his dear friend and client had “no care” when traveling with his publisher: “He leaves the entire business part with me. If he wants a pair of gloves I pay for them, as I do all the bills for joint accounts. He says this is the only way he can travel

\textsuperscript{26} Caroline Ticknor, \textit{Hawthorne and His Publisher} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), 6.  
\textsuperscript{27} Ticknor 8.  
\textsuperscript{28} Madison, \textit{Irving to Irving} 14.
in comfort, and it is not trouble to me.” 29 One might easily configure Hawthorne’s reliance upon his publishers in traditional marital terms wherein Hawthorne happily played the role of a dependent, albeit at times demanding, “wife.” Hawthorne was married with children and did head his own household. Increasingly, however, he depended upon Ticknor and Fields to manage his affairs, especially while traveling when he preferred to relegate all responsibilities to his publishers. Ticknor’s son remembers that Hawthorne
liked best to be taken to such plain, miscellaneous hotels as the Astor, or Bixby’s, to be entered anonymously as “a friend” of his companion, to carry no money, to know nothing of the details of the journey, to make only chance acquaintances whom he could anatomize, but who could have no clue to him, and to be brought back home as mutely as he had been taken away. Often has the writer [Mr. Howard Ticknor] noticed, when the two were starting for some outing, a look on Hawthorne’s face of affectionate trustfulness, content, and of such rest as if the profitable trip had been already enjoyed. It was strange to him, a youth, that one grown man should seem so dependent upon another. 30

Ticknor not only protected Hawthorne’s identity and allowed him to travel as a dependent, but he was also willing to risk his own life in order to tend to the best interests of his friend and client. While traveling with Hawthorne during inclement weather, Ticknor feared that his friend might become ill and so wrapped his own coat around Hawthorne. This gesture of kindness and gentility, his family would learn eventually, led to Ticknor’s developing the pneumonia that killed him. After nursing his friend in the hour of death to no avail, Hawthorne was bereft and guilt-stricken about Ticknor’s death, believing that he should have died instead. His doctors urged a change of scenery for the miserable author, but the trip to New Hampshire was too taxing, and Hawthorne died within weeks of his friend and publisher.

29 Qtd. in Madison’s Irving to Irving 14, 15.
30 Ticknor 9.
Fields remarked that Hawthorne’s passing “was like losing a portion of our household, so closely interwoven had become the interest and affection of the two families.”\textsuperscript{31} Hawthorne had indeed become like family to his publishers. His steadfast loyalty to and dependence upon them was in response to businessmen who believed rightly that, in treating Hawthorne as close family, they were establishing a basis for trust and caring that would free their client to produce his best fiction. In order to facilitate the transformation of an insecure and moody writer into a literary icon, Ticknor and Fields demonstrated their genius for perceiving and addressing their friend’s practical and psychological needs. Like many writers, Hawthorne had a complicated, even conflicted, personality and could be “neurotic, egotistical, cantankerous, but also lovable and idealistic.”\textsuperscript{32}

Hawthorne clearly found comfort in playing the role of dependent to his solicitous and adoring publishers. In giving over so many of his practical affairs to them, he was able to live comfortably while at home and abroad and was therefore better able to develop his creative talents. Ticknor and Fields undoubtedly molded Hawthorne’s literary career and provided him with the practical support and friendly intimacy he needed to reach his artistic potential. In doing so, they met Page’s expectations that publishers felt called to serve authors who, with enough support and care, would, in Page’s words, “lay the great democracy that we all serve under.”\textsuperscript{33}

Hawthorne’s willingness to play the role of dependent to his paternalistic publishers was replicated between publishers like Ticknor & Fields and many of their financially successful female authors. There were practical reasons why writers like

\textsuperscript{31} Madison, \textit{Irving to Irving} 16.
\textsuperscript{32} Madison, \textit{Irving to Irving} 9, 17.
Harriet Beecher Stowe, E.D.E.N. Southworth, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps needed to establish close and often paternalistic alliances with publishers. Scholars including Nina Baym, Mary Kelley, Anne Goodwyn Jones, and Susan Coultrap-McQuin have discussed the need for nineteenth-century women writers to maintain reputations as pious, pure, and domestic women who would not sully themselves with direct contact with the literary marketplace and commercialism. To convince women writers to enter into business relationships that would not violate their identities as private, moral women, publishers worked hard to “create an image of themselves and their profession that was genial and lofty. They thought of themselves as ‘Gentleman Publishers’ and professed beliefs in personal relationships, noncommercial aims, and moral guardianship.”

In addition to presenting themselves as moral guardians ready to protect the reputations of their authors, firms like Ticknor & Fields were designed well for the female writer since the structure of their publishing houses mirrored that of a traditional patriarchal family. As Lewis Coser, Charles Kadushin, and Walter Powell note, “the typical publisher was a small, family-owned paternalistic firm” and “since many publishers were family concerns, wives, sisters, mothers, and daughters often helped out informally.” The Old Corner Bookstore in Boston, where Ticknor & Fields started their business, for example, provided a warm and friendly meeting place for writers to mingle with their publishers. The genial atmosphere of the house was extended into the home of

---

33 Page 175.
35 Coultrap-McQuin 28.
36 Coser, Kadusin, Powell 149.
James T. Fields and his wife, Annie, both of whom made their home a gathering place for writers. Annie Fields became friends with many writers, including Harriet Beecher Stowe. Her husband also relied on her as an informal partner, as she often read manuscripts and made recommendations for publication.

Women writers were comfortable working for publishers who ran their businesses on the model of traditional patriarchal families and who treated their clients like valued friends, even dependents. The friendly nature of the familial and caring ties they developed enabled them to maintain their reputations as True Women while they made respectable incomes for themselves and for their families. Susan Coultrap-McQuin, for example, describes the close and mutually enjoyable and profitable relationship between Fields and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. McQuin explains that, in her business connections, Phelps

shared the traditional expectations of a personal friendship as well as a professional relationship between author and publisher. Her association with James Fields in the 1860s and 1870s matched the ideal of the Gentleman Publisher’s marketplace; they were actually good friends. They socialized frequently, and Annie Fields became one of Phelps’s closest friends. In James Fields, Phelps found attitudes that complemented her own vision of herself as a woman of feminine strength. He not only supported the movement to broaden women’s rights, but also was chivalrous to women simply because of their special qualities as women. In her opinion, he was helpful, unselfish, loyal, and religious—a valuable friend, an ideal husband, and a ‘practical’ Christian. He encouraged her when she was self-doubtful, stimulating her courage and her work. In short, their relationship fostered loyalty and trust.”

Phelps was happiest and most comfortable working with publishers who, like Fields, were trusted friends. By the mid 1880s, Phelps felt disappointed and at sea when trying to negotiate with a new generation of more impersonal and business-oriented publishers.

---

38 Tyron 344; also see chapter on Harriet Beecher Stowe in Coultrap-McQuin 79-105.
39 Coultrap-McQuin 185-86.
She became dissatisfied and nostalgic for the days when she had known publishers who valued loyalty to their writers and mixed business with pleasure and friendship as a matter of course.  

E.D.E.N. Southworth became even more intimate with and dependent upon her publisher, Robert Bonner of the *The New York Ledger*, than Phelps had been upon Fields. Susan Coultrap-McQuin explains that Robert Bonner was cast “in the ‘male’ role of provider and protector and Southworth in the ‘female’ role of less able, though creative dependent.” Southworth became a financially successful writer after Bonner took her under his wing, praised her work both publicly and privately, and facilitated her rise from poverty and exhaustion to a position of personal comfort and immense literary popularity throughout the country.

Southworth’s life had descended into chaos and deprivation with her two young children when her husband abandoned her. She struggled in poverty trying to write to support her young family until Bonner offered her recognition as a gifted storyteller deserving of praise and fair compensation. Important to Southworth was his gracious manner and way of treating her like a “lady.” She also appreciated his willingness to offer “magnanimity” in exchange for her fidelity and devotion. McQuin explains that in many letters Southworth wrote to her editor she described him “like a hero” in one of her novels who “swept” into her life “to protect and provide for her”: “Her rescue made her always grateful and faithful, as any heroine would have been.” Southworth’s loyalty to Bonner was such that she eventually turned down more lucrative offers from other publishers since, she wrote him, “honor, gratitude, old habit, and my own best interests

---

40 Coultrap-McQuin 186.
and most sacred friendships, bind me fast to the *Ledger.*” Then, employing matrimonial language to reassure him, she continues: “Believe me ever, in *thought, word,* and *deed,* Faithfully yours.”

Bonner happily played the “male” role in her family, acting as a role model for her son, even offering to buy a substitute for her son should he be drafted for the Civil War. He crossed the boundaries from professional to paternalistic helpmate in order to come to his client’s aid and to protect her interests. After Bonner defended her in a dispute with an old publisher, for instance, Southworth declared her delight in the many ways her publisher offered her the traditional support she wanted in a man: “If all men were as prompt and spirited in defending the women dependent upon them, as you are then we should not hear so much fuss about women’s rights. We should all be very glad to leave our rights in the hands of our brave, big brothers.”

Bonner was a shrewd publisher. Instead of browbeating his female client, he paid her well and always took a chivalrous approach to defending her interests. Southworth remained single and was a highly independent, productive, and financially successful writer. In her publisher, she delighted in all the protection, security, and trust that she might have found in a kind, faithful, and competent husband. Southworth and Bonner’s publishing alliance did not disappoint the author’s expectations; it was characterized by mutual devotion, generosity, and lifelong fidelity.

Hawthorne, Phelps, and Southworth all experienced close to ideal alliances with their publishers. There were writers who were not satisfied with their publishers, but the

---

41 Coultrap-McQuin 50; also see Kelley 21-23.
42 Coultrap-McQuin 22.
43 Qtd. in Coultrap-McQuin 72.
44 Coultrap-McQuin 72.
ideal of author-editor alliances remained the hallmark of respectable publishing houses throughout the nineteenth century. The Civil War, however, did create changes in the publishing world that would threaten the ideal of small, familial style publishing houses wherein authors were easily integrated into the familial atmosphere of such firms. Publishing historian John Tebbel points out that the years between 1865 and 1919 were a period of transition for publishing: “Although the old houses remained personal family businesses, they were expanding at the same time into large-scale general business organizations of the kind we know today.” Books were published for a mass market and, while publishers were still interested in quality books, many were in fact published for profit. “As always,” Tebbel observes, “there were literary books of merit on the lists of the general publishers, but as the century ended, the criterion of salability was paramount. Publishing might still be a gentleman’s business, but it was a business and not a sometimes profitable pastime.”

By the turn of the century, Henry Holt and Walter Hines Page feared the increasingly threatening role of literary agents, who they believed contributed to commercialism by their attempts to negotiate on behalf of authors for higher royalties and better advertising. Holt and Page also accused agents of interfering with the coveted author-publisher alliance. It was in the interests of agents to create competition among publishers and to sell manuscripts to the highest bidder. Auctioning books, in Holt and Page’s view, not only interfered with the “courtesy of the trade” principle, but it left

45 Qtd. in Coultrap-McQuin 72.
46 Mary Abigail Dodge is an example of a nineteenth-century woman writer who recoiled from what she perceived as the condescending and unfair business practices of her publisher, James T. Fields. See Coultrap-McQuin 105-37; W.S. Tyron 334-49.
47 Tebbel, Between Covers 81.
48 Tebbel, Between Covers 82.
writers in a position where they did not care about establishing long-term alliances with one respectable publisher.  

Publishing historian Charles Madison laments the commercialization of literature along with Holt and Page, but he is also optimistic. In his *Book Publishing in America* (1966), Madison strikes a note of optimism when he opines that even “commercialized” publishers . . . want to bring out some books of literary quality. And a few [editors and publishers], their own masters and genuinely fond of good writing, manage to concentrate their efforts on books of solid merit without losing their financial independence. One need only name Holt and Scribner and Houghton of the older generation and Huebsch, Knopf, Harcourt, and Norton of recent years, to make evident that as long as men are attracted to publishing, good books will continue to attract the more serious publisher.  

Holt and Page were justified in their fears that the cottage days of pre-Civil War book publishing had all but vanished and that by the turn into the twentieth century many houses had abandoned traditional publishing ethics in favor of profits and quick returns. As Madison points out, however, there continued to be firms well into the twentieth century that still maintained the standards of gentleman publishers, cared about the quality of their publications, and were firm in their commitment to cultivating close and lasting author-publisher bonds.

---

49 In “The Commercialization of Literature,” Henry Holt makes clear why he is suspicious of agents: “Certainly very different views of the ideal relations between author and publisher are held by a class whose interests in the subject are as real as the publishers. I refer to literary agents. Their ideal . . . is that an author shall never see a publisher and that an author’s books shall be scattered among those who will bid the highest” (Holt 580).


51 John Tebbel points out that “for years tradition demanded that authors remain loyal to the publishers who first produced their work, and a great many did, but in the twenties, under the pressure of new financial rewards and the work of agents, the old loyalties began to dissolve in many, but not all, cases.” See John Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing in the United States*, Vol. III (New York: R.R. Bowker Company, 1981), 52.
Editors at Random House, for instance, remained determined not to let commercial considerations interfere with their choice of authors.\textsuperscript{32} Jason Epstein describes the ways Bennett Cerf and Donald Klopfer made personal sacrifices in order to bring prestige and quality to the house they had founded in the 1920s:

When Bennett and Donald owned Random House, the last thing they expected to do, as Bennett wrote in his memoirs, was to make money, and in this respect they were typical of their brilliant publishing generation. They worked for the joy of the task and to their surprise made an unexpected fortune when they sold 30 percent of the firm to the public in October 1959 and a greater fortune when RCA bought the company for $40 million in January 1966. Though Random House was probably the most successful trade book publisher of its time, it was well known within the firm that the owners took modest salaries, less in several cases than they paid members of the staff, whose incomes they were in effect subsidizing. They were experts at their craft, and among the happiest and surely the sweetest men I have ever known.\textsuperscript{53}

Although Henry Holt and Walter Hines Page already feared the effects of the commercialization of literature at the turn into the twentieth century, they may have been gratified had they been able to observe the growth of firms including Random House and Charles Scribner’s Sons.

Charles Scribner’s Sons, as Madison noted, was a house dedicated to maintaining “the gentlemanly business of publishing.” In his book honoring the hundredth anniversary of Charles Scribner’s Sons, \textit{Of Making Many Books} (1946), Roger Burlingame points out that Charles Scribner was determined that the firm should not yield “to the modern impersonal and statistical methods of operation.” He describes an “emphatically family firm” committed to holding on to its “established ways.”\textsuperscript{54} Maxwell

\textsuperscript{32} For a first-hand description of the way RCA’s take-over of Random House and Pantheon changed the nature of both firms, see the chapter entitled “Fixing the Bottom Line” in Schiffrin 73-102.
\textsuperscript{33} Epstein 87.
\textsuperscript{53} Burlingame describes Scribner’s as a house where “business was so personal and loyalties so intertwined.” See Roger Burlingame, \textit{Of Making Many Books} (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1946), 28.
Perkins, an editor at the House of Scribner for thirty-seven years, epitomized the firm’s commitment to cultivating and maintaining strong author-publisher bonds. Perkins was not only “the most far-sighted and creative editor of his time,” but he was unsurpassed in his genius for attracting and building strong ties of loyalty with some of the most famous writers of the century, including Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Thomas Wolfe, and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, to name only a few.55

Holt and Page would have applauded Scribner editor John Wheelock’s description of Perkins as an editor who offered his clients “selfless devotion.” Perkins, according to his colleague, was unusual because he considered the “recognizing, the encouraging, the guiding of talent . . . [as] a sacred task worth any amount of effort, risk, of time expended.”56 Another editor, Burroughs Mitchell, described Perkins’s greatest asset as his ability to gain the trust of his writers.57 John Wheelock expanded on this notion when he described Perkins as having the gift of “temperament and equipment” that “made him the ideal father-confessor, the listener, wise and sympathetic, whose understanding, often conveyed without words, acted as a catalyst, precipitating in many a writer the definite self-discovery which till then had been vast but formless aspiration.”58

Perkins motivated and inspired male and female writers alike. Marcia Davenport, a reporter for The New Yorker who wrote a biography of Mozart edited by Perkins, described what distinguished Perkins from other editors. Davenport credited Perkins with giving her the confidence to pursue the project, and she praised his genius for inspiring and calming writers. She explained that Perkins had the uncanny ability to “be

55 Wheelock 1.
56 Wheelock 2.
57 Mitchell 28, 29.
58 Wheelock 3.
with us, in mind, in mood, in the commonplaces of existence as much as in the notable experiences." She then went on to describe his classic qualities as an editor capable of infinite patience and intuitive powers. In addition, she described his ability to soothe the writer suffering from depression and working in painful isolation. "He was with us," she explained,

in retrospection when we dealt with remembered experience, and in anticipation when we were grappling with the still unformed mass of what we aimed at. He gave us infinite, tolerant understanding which built a floor under the isolation and solitude that are a writer's life. Writers elect that life and thereafter suffer with it, often in terrible discouragement and despair, sometimes in elation that is only momentary. Max said and, more typically, wrote to all of us, in one phase or another, "It is the good book that gives a writer trouble." "All you lack in regard to this book is confidence." "Writing a novel is a very hard thing to do." "I know this is a terrible task." "Don't lose courage." His patience was prodigious.\(^5^9\)

Perkins understood that his writers were more likely to pass through periods of depression and writer's block if he listened to them patiently and demonstrated his support quietly, without trying to hurry them to meet deadlines.

It is little wonder that so many writers, including Caroline Gordon, came to depend upon Perkins's reassuring presence in their lives. Gordon had a rocky relationship with Perkins because her novels never sold well, and she was constantly frustrated and concerned that Scribner's was not promoting her books adequately, a common complaint among writers.\(^6^0\) Nevertheless, Perkins came to represent to Gordon

---

\(^{59}\) Marcia Davenport wrote the introduction to the new edition of Wheelock's *Editor to Author*, xvi; Perkins biographer, Scott Berg, describes his subject this way: "His literary judgment was exceedingly astute, and he was famous for his ability to inspire an author to produce the best that was in him or her. More of a friend to his authors than a taskmaster, he aided them in every way. He helped them structure their books, if help was needed; thought up titles, invented plots; he served as psychoanalyst, lovelorn advisor, marriage counselor, career manager, money-lender. Few editors before him had done so much work on manuscripts, yet he was always faithful to his credo, 'The book belongs to the author.'" *See Max Perkins: Editor of Genius* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978), 4.

\(^{60}\) Gordon wrote to her friend, Ward Dorrence, regarding Scribner's: "I hope they do better by you than they did by me. They are such nice people and I simply dote on Max, but they certainly don't make much effort to sell books—at least some books. My book was a complete failure, financially, didn't even pay

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
a "spiritual father" of sorts, as Wheelock claims he had become for so many writers. Upon hearing about his death, Gordon expressed her grief and sense of loss to her friend, Ward Dorrence. She told Dorrence that she still had a lot of things she wanted to tell Max:

I simply can't realize that Max is dead. It has done all sorts of things to me. I am still talking to him. I mean we both understood that we were both terribly occupied and all that, but we saved up things to tell each other, and now he is dead and all sorts of things—some of them rather silly—I can never tell anybody else. What I mean is that for twenty years, there was always Max, and now there isn't any Max. Well my father's death hit me in much the same way, but I guess I said—to myself—"You've still got Max"—but I don't have him anymore.

Clearly, Gordon's feelings for her editor had become familial over the years and it had not been difficult for her to see him as a father replacement figure, a man in her life who was dependable, who believed in her, and who would, if needed, put all of his mind into helping her through a difficult passage in a novel.

Perkins developed familial relationships with his male writers as well. His biographer, Scott Berg, observed that Perkins "related to Fitzgerald as uncle to pleasure-seeking but adored nephew." Hemingway, on the other hand, was to Perkins "the daredevil 'kid brother,' forever getting into dangerous scrapes, forever being advised and cautioned by his 'big brother.'" Perkins's relationship with Thomas Wolfe was altogether different and more intense. Thomas Wolfe became the son that Perkins never

back its advance" (Caroline Gordon to Ward Dorrence, undated, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill).

61 Wheelock 7.
had, and Wolfe wrote to Perkins that he was "one of the rocks to which my life is anchored." 

Thomas Wolfe’s relationship with Perkins was intense, complicated, and mutually dependent. The troubling nature of the falling out between Wolfe and Perkins, moreover, shows how sometimes author-editor alliances would deteriorate in much the same way that married couples or family members might be unable to overcome their conflicts and become sadly estranged. The Perkins-Wolfe relationship, in both its intensity and its complexity, probably best mirrors the pleasures and difficulties that Porter encountered in her alliances with editors and publishers. Like Porter, Wolfe became closely involved with his editor and extremely dependent upon his constant support and faith in his talent. At the same time, that intimacy and dependence, for both Wolfe and Porter, would become a recipe for resentment and ultimately for complete rejection of their publishers.

When Perkins discovered Wolfe he immediately recognized the writer’s immense talent and storytelling capabilities. Wolfe wrote tens of thousands of words that would require a massive investment of time on Perkins’s part, but the editor was impressed with the poetry and genius of the writer’s prose, and he would devote hours to “the process of detailed revision, explaining, cajoling, urging, directing.” Both Wolfe and Perkins loathed having to cut out so much of the manuscript during revision, but Wolfe grew to trust his editor’s skill and judgment implicitly. The first novel published by Scribner’s was the celebrated Look Homeward, Angel (1929). By the time the novel was published,

---

64 Berg 308. Maxwell Perkins had five daughters. Perkins and Wolfe worked together from their meeting in 1929 until Wolfe’s death in 1938.

65 Madison, Irving to Irving 171; the original manuscript of Look Homeward, Angel, O Lost, has been published by the University of South Carolina Press. The publication of the full and original text is valuable to Wolfe scholars, some of whom believe that Perkins cut too much of the manuscript for practical publishing purposes. See Thomas Wolfe’s O Lost: A Story of the Buried Life with the text established by Arlyn and Matthew Bruccoli (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000).
Wolfe had begun to think of his editor as "his surrogate parent, friend, and confessor." Wolfe had been able to break off a relationship with a woman much older than he, Aline Bernstein, once he was able to replace her maternal support and admiration with Perkins's equally satisfying and exhilarating devotion toward him.

Wolfe gained a degree of financial independence and confidence with the publication of Look Homeward, Angel, and he wrote to Perkins that the editor had created "liberty and hope" for him. He decided to travel to Europe, and he wrote home to his editor that he missed him and other Scribner employees as well. They had "become a part of my life and habit." While in Europe, Wolfe continued to depend upon Perkins for practical as well as emotional support. For instance, Wolfe did not hesitate to call upon his editor to help him find an apartment for him in New York so that he would have a place to live upon returning home.

It was the depth of psychological support, however, upon which Wolfe had become truly dependent. When Wolfe received attacks from critics who believed his work was too autobiographical, Perkins performed an invaluable service for his friend, one that he considered part of his duty as editor and friend:

I, who thought Tom a man of genius, and loved him too, and could not bear to see him fail, was almost as desperate as he,—so much there was to do,—But the truth is that if I did him a real service—and in this I did—it was in keeping him from losing his belief in himself in a crisis by believing in him. What he most needed was comradeship and understanding in a long crisis—these things I could give him then.

---

66 Madison, Irving to Irving 171.
67 Madison, Irving to Irving 173.
68 Qtd. in Madison, Irving to Irving 175; For a complete picture of this author editor alliance see Mathew J. Bruccoli and Park Bucker, eds., My Life Clean: The Thomas Wolfe-Maxwell Perkins Correspondence (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Perkins’s involvement with his writers was clearly multi-faceted and a complex weave of practical, emotional, and editorial support.

Given the sensitive and insecure nature of many writers, including Wolfe and Porter, it is perhaps not surprising that highly personal business alliances sometimes become volatile, even destructive, when conflicts inevitably arise between author and editor. There would inevitably be repercussions to face after the year during which Perkins spent long evenings working diligently along with Wolfe to edit the unwieldy manuscript that was to be published as *Of Time and the River* in 1935. Perkins’s dedication to the project was such that Wolfe was in awe of his friend’s support. Wolfe dedicated the novel “To Maxwell Evert Perkins”:

> A great editor and a brave and honest man, who stuck to the writer of this book through times of bitter hopelessness and doubt and would not let him give in to his own despair, a work to be known as *Of Time and the River* is dedicated with the hope that all of it may be in some way worthy of the loyal devotion and the patient care which a dauntless and unshaken friend has given to each part of it, and without which none of it could have been written.69

This was a lofty tribute to a self-effacing editor who believed that, at most, an editor serves as “handmaiden to the author,” and while he occasionally “releases energy,” he “creates nothing.”70

Not long after the book’s publication, Wolfe would come to resent his dependence upon Perkins, and he would blame all criticisms of the novel on him. In particular, Wolfe was sensitive to and resentful of critics who implied that he could not write a successful novel without his editor.71 The reasons for Wolfe’s ultimate break

---

69 Thomas Wolfe, *Of Time and River: A Legend of Man’s Hunger in His Youth* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1935).
70 Qtd. in Berg 6.
71 Berg 308; Maxwell Perkins was composing an essay about Wolfe when he died in 1947. In this essay, he assesses what he believes were the repercussions of Wolfe’s dedication to him: “He dedicated that book to
with Scribner's were multifold, but certainly Wolfe's willingness to blame Perkins for all of the novel's shortcomings was motivated by a deeper desire on the part of the writer to declare independence from the man whom he had once worshiped and credited with his success. In *You Can't Go Home Again*, Wolfe created an autobiographical fictional hero who described his editor as "someone older and wiser to show me the way" and who "took the place of my father who had died." Inevitably, the writer would eventually go about the process of painfully severing himself from the man who had meant so many things to him, but who now, he felt, dangerously threatened his artistic integrity.72

Perkins was devastated by Wolfe's decision to change publishers although he accepted his friend's decision gracefully. Scott Berg attributes the grace with which Perkins accepted Wolfe's departure to the editor's belief in its inevitability. Perkins understood Wolfe's need to prove that he could be successful as a writer without the paternalistic solicitude and dedication of his publishers, but the break was painful. After a difficult year, Perkins wrote to Wolfe: "I drink a lonely glass of ale every night in Manny Wolfe's while waiting for the paper... We really had a mighty good Christmas, but we missed you."73

Wolfe's departure from Scribner's had not been smooth. Rather, perhaps because he needed to construe reasons to justify his departure, the writer became accusatory, even me in most extravagant terms. I never saw the dedication until the book was published and though I was most grateful for it, I had forebodings when I heard of his intention. I think it was that dedication that threw him off his stride and broke his magnificent scheme. It gave shallow people the impression that Wolfe could not function as a writer without collaboration, and one critic even used some such phrase as, 'Wolfe and Perkins—Perkins and Wolfe, what way is that to write a novel.' Nobody with the slightest comprehension of the nature of a writer could accept such an assumption. No writer could possibly tolerate the assumption, which perhaps Tom almost himself did, that he was dependent as a writer upon anyone else. He had to prove to himself and to the world that this was not so" (see Maxwell E. Perkins, "Thomas Wolfe," *Harvard Library Bulletin*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Autumn 1947). 72  Qtd. in Berg 311.

73  Qtd. in Berg 336.
unfair and irrational at times. In a twenty-eight page single-spaced typewritten letter, Wolfe expressed his range of complaints and emotions in a “volcanic outpouring” that revealed the degree to which he was bitter about the dependence he had developed upon his editor. Although he acknowledged Perkins’s “profound and sensitive understanding,” “utter loyalty,” and “staunch support,” he also felt it necessary to make his resentment clear, especially when it came to facing criticism that he was not an independent artist: “As you know,” he raged, “I don’t have to have you or any other man alive to help me with my books. . . . There has never been a time when I am so determined to write what I please, to say what I intend to say, to publish the books I want to publish, as I am now.”

There can be little doubt that Perkins influenced significantly the development of Wolfe’s artistry by helping the writer to prune and shape his voluminous prose into coherent novels. Nevertheless, the close nature of their familial bond demonstrates the difficulties associated with business alliances that become highly personal and that often influence dramatically the writer’s artistic agenda. Wolfe would inevitably lash out at the ways he regarded Scribner’s as having mishandled his affairs, including the lawsuits he had to cope with owing to the highly autobiographical nature of his writing. But the ease with which Wolfe found reasons to criticize his publishers was rooted in the deeper reality that he was frustrated by his dependence upon his editor and was motivated to establish independence from the “father figure” who had become so inextricably connected with his personal life and creative work. Perkins was wise in his willingness to acknowledge that, given the intense nature of his father-son bond with his Wolfe, and given the extreme sensitivities of his young protégé, the business and personal alliance he had created was bound to end in an emotionally wrenching parting of ways.

74 Qtd. in Berg 180.
The anguished break between Perkins and Wolfe was unusual; the editor's steady, if occasionally contentious, alliance with Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings was more typical. Rawlings, best-selling author of *The Yearling* and *Cross Creek*, worked with Perkins from 1930 until Perkins's death in 1947 and, like Wolfe, wrote her best fiction while working closely with an editor who in time became her intimate friend and artistic mentor. Perkins reinforced and sustained Rawlings during the most difficult times of her writing life when she needed constant praise and a gentle friend and advisor who would allay her fears and self-doubts and reinforce her fledgling and later more mature artistic identity. In addition, Perkins not only acted as an informal financial advisor but also counseled her on how she should handle her agent.\(^{75}\)

Rawlings's relationship with Perkins is intriguing because Rawlings, a driven, independent-minded woman with a distinctly feminist bent, grew to trust her editor implicitly. She depended upon him for critical feedback and for a constant infusion of encouraging words. Perkins's role in her writing life was almost maternal in nature since he was sensitive to her every mood and whim and fashioned his communications accordingly. In an effort not to pressure Rawlings, for instance, he gave her the confidence to trust her instincts and to finish her work in her own time: "I do not want to hurry you," he explained, "for such things must be done according to the demands of the subject and the material. But I need not tell you, for you clearly know what you are about."\(^{76}\) Once Perkins had decided upon a writer's talent, his patience, support, and sense of loyalty remained steadfast. His understanding of the mercurial nature of the

---

\(^{75}\) See introduction to Rodger L. Tarr, ed., *Max & Marjorie*.

\(^{76}\) Tarr 48
artistic sensibility, moreover, meant that his “nurturing increased almost in proportion to her lagging creative abilities.”\textsuperscript{77}

In addition, Perkins laid the groundwork for Rawlings’s ascent to celebrity status and financial security since his ambition from the start was to bring her into the literary mainstream in the United States. He introduced her to other famous writers, gossiped with her about them, and at the same time worked to prepare her for the destiny he envisioned for her as a successful, profitable, and beloved author. She did indeed join Hemingway, Fitzgerald and Wolfe as one of Scribner’s literary stars and therefore was rewarded by a sense of deep accomplishment and by the freedom of financial security.

In an effort to help Rawlings reach her artistic potential, Perkins made suggestions as to how the writer might shape and refine her true material, which Perkins realized early on was the “scrub country” in the backwoods of South Florida.\textsuperscript{78} Rawlings was grateful for her editor’s extensive comments and in awe of his critical gifts: “You have a truly amazing genius for taking the product of another’s imagination in the hollow of your hand,” she wrote him. “It is the height, I suppose, of critical sympathy and understanding.”\textsuperscript{79} Perkins devoted himself completely to critical commentary when he believed such guidance necessary. But the path to her success, he seemed to understand intuitively, required his willingness to offer enduring friendship. He did not neglect Rawlings, even while his time was substantially drained by his intensive work with other writers, including Thomas Wolfe.

\textsuperscript{77} Tarr 15.
\textsuperscript{78} Tarr 3.
\textsuperscript{79} Tarr 77. On another occasion, Rawlings wrote to Perkins to thank him for giving her the confidence in her writing that she was seeking desperately: “I can’t tell you how happy I am that you like the general fabric of the book. I have put up a pretty stiff fight against despair of one sort or another, and the feeling you gave me that I have accomplished something of what I set out to do, and that the thing is not utterly impossible, is like firm ground under my feet after struggling in quick-sand” (Tarr 179).
As their relationship progressed, the familiar relationship between Max and Marjorie became one of mutual dependence, as she counseled and comforted him with regard to his personal relationships, with his wife Louise, for example, or with other difficult writers, including Thomas Wolfe. They also shared information about their health problems, personal crises, and attempts to control their drinking. After Perkins’s death in 1947, Rodger L. Tarr observes, Rawlings “had become so dependent upon Perkins for personal inspiration and editorial guidance that she became increasingly despondent. Her literary career declined rapidly.”

The interdependence and mutual admiration between Perkins and his writers are important because those bonds support the claim made by Walter Hines Page and Henry Holt that the most successful writers reach their potential usually with the help of long-standing and productive alliances with their editors and publishers. No editor epitomized Holt and Page’s theories about the profession of publishing more than Max Perkins. Perkins undoubtedly influenced editors and publishers like Donald Brace and Seymour Lawrence. His brilliance in cultivating, nurturing, and sustaining author-editor alliances set a standard for literary editors that many, even into the present, still hope to emulate.

In *Irving to Irving: Author-Publisher Relations 1800-1974*, Charles Madison gives examples of numerous author-editor alliances wherein editors like Max Perkins demonstrate their talents as counselors and enablers. In describing his long dependence upon his editor, Pascal Covici, John Steinbeck provides another testimonial to an editor who encouraged him to follow his creative intuition and provided him with an endless stream of letters that emboldened him to reach his artistic potential. When Covici died, Steinbeck’s tribute to his editor sums up the degree to he had become dependent upon

---

*Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.*
and indebted to a man he considered as much more to him than a professional ally. Clearly, many author-editor alliances were fueled by an often openly expressed mutual admiration. Unlike Porter and Wolfe’s uneasiness with their own level of dependence upon their editors and publishers, Steinbeck’s feelings toward Covici were adulatory and unwavering. “Pat Covici,” he explained,

was more than my friend. He was my editor. Only a writer can understand how a great editor is father, mother, teacher, personal devil and personal god. For thirty years Pat was my collaborator and my conscience. He demanded of me more than I had and thereby caused me to be more than I should have been without him.81

Steinbeck’s testimonial adds further proof that numerous editors, especially before the advent of corporate publishing, were well positioned to cultivate an intimacy that would require them to play a variety of roles for clients who were alternatively charming, needy, insecure, even childishly irresponsible, whiny, and demanding.

During the years following World War II, the publishing industry became more competitive and corporate so that the frequency of intimate and long-term author-publisher alliances diminished in an industry that was less and less “like a small town where everyone knew everyone else and felt a kinship that was not to be found in ordinary commercial enterprises.”82 By the late fifties and early sixties, publishing houses were merging and going public. Traditional houses were increasingly managed by businessmen who were more concerned with commercial opportunities and pleasing the stockholders than with catering to the judgments of literary editors.83

81 Madison, Irving to Irving 212.
82 Madison, Between Covers 463.
Henry Holt would not have approved of the man who would become president of his firm in 1949—Edgar Rigg. Rigg was a securities analyst who did not consider himself a book person; rather, his preoccupation was with revamping a company that was run, in his words, like “a tea party.” Rigg cared little for the unprofitable trade books and preferred the more profitable textbook publishing: “There’s a lot of romance but damn little profit in trade books,” Rigg declared, “and I’m not interested in romance.” He consented to publish trade books, however, claiming that it was not simply “as a public relations front.” Yet he was pleased that the trade department did at least create “a desirable corporate image.”

In the late 1970s, Michael Korda, editor-in-chief at Simon & Schuster, bluntly described his profession in a manner that would have been unthinkable to Page, Holt, and Perkins: “We sell books, other people sell shoes. What’s the difference? Publishing isn’t the highest art.” Korda’s flippant tone represents a change in the role of editors in corporate publishing houses, where editors found themselves “bouncing from house to house, either as a result of mergers or because they’re wooed in a newly competitive environment fostered by the conglomerates.” Editors were no longer “the calm center of the author’s universe.” Instead, they found themselves working in a transient industry where they no longer enjoyed familial work environments characterized by loyalty, stability, and familiarity with co-workers and clients. The competitive and profit-oriented climate within publishing houses created an ideal opportunity for agents to

---

85 Apple, Jr. 15.
replace editors; agents emerged more than ever in the roles of confidant, helpmate, and advocate on behalf of their clients.  

Testimony from literary editors saddened, frustrated, and often disgruntled by the changes in their profession attests to the radical changes in the publishing industry after the 1960s. Many editors lamented that impersonal corporate publishing houses precluded them from working closely with clients. Senior editor at Houghton Mifflin Company, Jonathan Galassi, describes the uncertain fate of the literary editor who still believes in writing for its own sake and in the value of publishing books for reasons of literary merit. “Some of these editors,” Galassi explains, are highly valued by their employers, who recognize the usefulness of their contributions and who have seen that some of the writers they sponsor do eventually become popular. Others are embattled, at odds with the companies they work for; sometimes they become embittered, quit or lose their jobs, and leave publishing altogether.

Editors soon learn, according to Galassi, that the adjective “literary” is “usually a synonym for abstruse, artsy, Brahmin, gnomic, high-falutin’, or academic and that the highest praise that can be bestowed upon a book is for it to be called ‘commercial.’”

After thirty years of working as the Managing Director of Pantheon, a house that was that was taken over by the conglomerate RCA in 1965, André Schiffrin fled corporate publishing to establish his own independent house, The New Press. Schiffrin

---

88 Trip 62, 63; Coser, Kadushin, and Powell point out that “direct contact with authors had been increasingly replaced by a mediated relationship that forecloses close association between editor and author” (Coser, Kadushin, and Powell 32).
describes with regret the disappearance of a publishing world that has all but disappeared from the contemporary landscape. He recalls a time when it was assumed that believing in authors was an investment for the future and that they would remain faithful to the publishers who had discovered and nourished them. Poaching authors from other firms was not considered fair play. Overall, trade publishers reckoned they would lose money or at best break even on their trade books. Profit would come from subsidiary rights—sales to book clubs or paperback publishers. \(^90\)

The apparent affinity between editors like André Schiffrin and Jason Epstein and their predecessors, including Henry Holt and Walter Hines Page, is stunning. Many of the complaints that Holt and Page articulated at the turn into the twentieth century still plagued Epstein and Schiffrin as they wrote their memoirs at the turn into the twenty-first century. Jason Epstein, however reluctantly, has looked into the future of publishing and tried evaluate with some optimism an industry that is currently being radically transformed by the internet. \(^91\)

In a publishing climate where editors have slowly lost the ability they once had to form life-long alliances with individual authors, agents have become useful as intermediaries between writers and publishers. They have become even more vital to writers in a publishing world that is increasingly unstable and challenging to navigate, as they understand the “vocabulary” of business negotiations, and they possess the necessary distance to act as “tougher, less emotional negotiators.” \(^92\) Agents have needed to be more than tough negotiators, however. Like traditional editors, they are required to nurture their clients, to run interference for them, to protect their interests, and often to

---

\(^{90}\) Schiffrin 11.

\(^{91}\) See the chapter, “Modem Times,” in Epstein 143-75.

\(^{92}\) West III 18.
perform practical favors. Agents, in short, must offer the friendship, flattery, and familial "mothering" or paternalism that many writers require.\footnote{See Coser, Kadushin, and Powell 292.}

In his study of Eudora Welty's long and fruitful friendship with her agent Diarmuid Russell, Michael Kreyling tells the story of an agent who played an integral role in the writer's artistic and professional development.\footnote{Michael Kreyling, Author and Agent. Diarmuid is pronounced Dermott.} Russell became Welty's trusted friend and associate from the beginning of their alliance in 1940; he was also her only agent. In several interviews, Welty declared: "I couldn't live without Diarmuid... I just can't tell you how much it meant to me to have him there. His integrity, his understanding, his instincts—everything was something I trusted."\footnote{Peggy Whitman Prenshaw ed., Conversations with Eudora Welty (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1984), 72, 185.}

Welty's reliance upon Russell was multi-faceted. He protected her from the demands of publishers, offered valuable feedback on her writing, and placed her stories, even when early on doing so required phenomenal patience and persistence. In addition, Kreyling explains that Russell was "hardheaded and unsentimental" in business but understanding and sensitive toward artists. He also "trusted his intuitive responsive to works of literature and distrusted criticism." Russell was therefore both in tune with Welty's creativity and at the same time dedicated to protecting her business interests.\footnote{According to Kreyling, Diarmuid was influenced by his father, George William Russell (1867-1935), "self-christened A.E. upon his conversion to the visionary life." A.E. was a poet, journalist, dramatist, and} He performed as a genuine and stalwart friend, business advocate, and intellectual companion until his death in 1973.

Early on in her career, Welty was a short story writer trying to make her way in a publishing market where collections of short stories were regarded as "snack food" and
novels the "entée." Welty would need an agent able to respect her commitment to the short story genre. Publishers printed collections of short stories with reluctance, and they either chose writers whose reputations were established or for whom they would treat the collection as a "literary tea" meant to prime the public for the author's next novel. Max Perkins explained the attitude of publishers toward novels succinctly in a letter to Rawlings: "Of course the sales department always want a novel," he told her. "They would have turned the New Testament into one, if it had come to us for publication, and they could have."

Although it must have been difficult to resist the pressure from publishers, Russell cautioned Welty against the temptation of promising a novel that she was not inclined to write. He told her not to worry about "being salable": "If you don't really want to write a novel and start one it may turn out that it will not be good and all the effort will have been wasted. You do just as you feel like. Only by following your own path can you get anywhere." On another occasion, Russell quoted his father, the Irish mystic A.E., when he told her to "[l]et the joy be in doing and not in the end." He continued in his own words:

In other words, write what you want and when you feel like it and in this way you will be doing better work than if you get rigidly fixed in your mind the idea of another book or indeed anything very definite in the future. There are some writers who have nothing but a technical facility to them and these people can keep on turning out two books a year and so on and can do things on commission.

---

97 Brinkmeyer Jr., 186; Kreyling 13, 14.
99 Qtd. in Wheelock 84.
100 Qtd. in Kreyling 37, 50.
But I think it would be bad if you ever got anything of this kind fixed in your head.\footnote{Qt. in Kreyling 75.}

Russell’s understanding of Welty’s creative process, and his recognition of the kind of writer that she was not, distinguished him from shortsighted publishers who at times failed to consider the best interests of their authors, especially when they were determined to influence a writer’s creative agenda. Acting in the role of consummate and loyal advocate, Russell eventually succeeded in convincing Doubleday to publish \textit{A Curtain of Green and Other Stories} (1941). Katherine Anne Porter, friend and “an ally in the cause of the short story,” wrote the introduction.\footnote{Kreyling 40.}

Russell can also be credited with helping his client to discover her first novel, \textit{Delta Wedding} (1946), embedded in the story “Delta Cousins.”\footnote{Welty explained Russell’s role in an interview: “I sent what I thought was a story in to Diarmuid called “The Delta Cousins,” and he wrote back and said, ‘Eudora, this is chapter two of a novel. Go on with it.’ He recognized that it had a possible scope to it or something. It hadn’t occurred to me; it might never have occurred to me. And it never occurred to me that I could write a novel, but he spotted it. His judgment was so acute and I trusted everything he said, absolutely. You know, I would have given it a try after he’d said that, no matter what had happened. So I just went on from there, and “The Delta Cousins” became \textit{Delta Wedding}” (Prenshaw 180).} Although Welty had to get used to the idea of departing from the genre that she felt suited her talents, her agent helped her to see that in “Delta Cousins” she was “stretching her short-story technique close to the snapping point.”\footnote{Kreyling’s words 95.} For years Russell had supported Welty in her inclination never to write “anything that didn’t spring naturally to mind and engage my imagination.”\footnote{Prenshaw 86.} When she wrote her first novel, it was not under duress or for commercial reasons; her progression from short story writer to novelist was unforced, a natural evolution of her talent.

\begin{flushright}
\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{101} Qt. in Kreyling 75. \\
\textsuperscript{102} Kreyling 40. \\
\textsuperscript{103} Welty explained Russell’s role in an interview: “I sent what I thought was a story in to Diarmuid called “The Delta Cousins,” and he wrote back and said, ‘Eudora, this is chapter two of a novel. Go on with it.’ He recognized that it had a possible scope to it or something. It hadn’t occurred to me; it might never have occurred to me. And it never occurred to me that I could write a novel, but he spotted it. His judgment was so acute and I trusted everything he said, absolutely. You know, I would have given it a try after he’d said that, no matter what had happened. So I just went on from there, and “The Delta Cousins” became \textit{Delta Wedding}” (Prenshaw 180). \\
\textsuperscript{104} Kreyling’s words 95. \\
\textsuperscript{105} Prenshaw 86.
\end{flushright}
Russell’s Perkins-like ability to inspire Welty artistically was complemented by the practical role he played in his friend’s life. One of the great benefits for Welty of working with Russell was that he took care of all of her publishing business in a completely trustworthy manner, and he left her free to write. This author-agent relationship that lasted through Welty’s most vital creative years illustrates how agents could effectively replace editors and shield their clients from the self-interested demands of publishers.

Examples of close author-editor and agent ties throughout publishing history instruct us not to interpret these alliances as merely business associations. Ranging from Max Perkins’s troubled but productive alliance with Thomas Wolfe to Eudora Welty’s tension-free and artistically liberating bond with Diarmuid Russell, we see that these bonds have often meant “everything” to writers and that an editor or agent’s capacity for influencing a client personally and creatively was often profound, even life-changing. In studying these friendships in detail as we will with Porter and her “business” partners, we can gain additional insights into the complex psychological terrain of a writer’s life and creative process. Many gifted editors and agents have been able to help their clients to navigate the practical and psychological labyrinth of their creative journeys. Correspondence between authors and their professional associates thus reveals more than soporific details about oppressive contracts and missed deadlines. Embedded within these documents, we discover the mental autobiographies of creative people, including revelations to professional “confessors” of emotions raging from anxious paralysis, helplessness, insecurity, and despair to expressions of compassion, gratitude, exhilaration, and hope.
Chapter Two

“Tangled Together Like Badly Cast Fishing Lines”:

Katherine Anne Porter and her Harcourt, Brace Family

In *Truth and Vision in Katherine Anne Porter’s Fiction*, Darlene Unrue observes that Katherine Anne Porter insisted upon “absolute honesty in language as the foundation of her aesthetic.” Porter also believed that “the search for truth” was the only “acceptable mission of the artist.” As such, the writer created characters “struggling both toward truth and against it, and she imaginatively conveys the agonies of the human struggle while showing the tragedy of the failures and the glories of the successes.” At the same time, Unrue points out that Porter’s “personal life was full of failures to make lasting connection with others, and sometimes full of self-deception; she created fictions for herself that often were as artistic as those in her stories.” Thus while as a literary artist Porter always “looked clearly and courageously,” in her personal life she was not always so honest with herself or with others.¹ She was often motivated by a tendency to shelter herself from the penetrating truths she was so intent upon exploring in her fiction.

Porter was certainly not always honest with herself about the true nature of her professional alliances, relationships that were inevitably tainted by the self-interested motives of both the writer and her publishers. From the outset, Porter was aware that her publishers had agreed to offer her advances and to invest in her personally because she

had fulfilled their expectations when she agreed to write a novel for them. By 1941 when Porter wrote an introduction to Eudora Welty's first book of short stories, she was more than aware of the consequences associated with being contractually bound to and constantly pressured by publishers whose expectations were unwavering. There "is a trap lying just ahead," she tells the reader in her essay "Eudora Welty and A Curtain of Green":

And all short-story writers know what it is—The Novel. That novel which every publisher hopes to obtain from every short-story writer of any gifts at all, and who finally does obtain it, nine times out of ten. Already publishers have told her [Welty], "Give us first a novel, and then we will publish your short stories." It is a special sort of trap for poets, too, though quite often a good poet can and does write a good novel. Miss Welty has tried her hand at novels, laboriously, dutifully, youthfully thinking herself perhaps in the wrong to refuse, since so many authoritarians have told her that was the next step. It is by no means the next step. She can very well become a master of the short story, there are almost perfect stories in A Curtain of Green. The short story is a special and difficult medium, and contrary to a widely spread popular superstition it has no formula that can be taught in correspondence school. There is nothing to hinder her from writing novels if she wishes or believes she can. I only say that her good gift, just as it is now, alive and flourishing, should not be retarded by a perfectly artificial demand upon her to do the conventional thing [my emphasis].

By the time Porter had written these lines, she had already spent more than ten pressure-filled years doing "the conventional thing" by trying unsuccessfully to meet her publisher's "artificial demand."

Yet instead of trying to extricate herself from publishing agreements that caused anxiety and creative paralysis and that required her to work against the grain of her natural talents, she had instead, by 1941, just recently reaffirmed her loyalties to Harcourt, Brace and to her editor, Donald Brace. In the spirit of some of her more misguided fictional characters, she had "created a fiction" about her editor, Donald
Brace, that fulfilled certain personal and practical needs in her life. Porter chose to elevate Brace beyond the status of professional associate and friend that he deserved. He became instead a fatherly figure, a man who Porter believed she could depend upon to protect her interests, as a devoted and unconditionally loving and supportive father would. Porter was unable to examine her professional relationships through the same analytical lens that she brought to her vocation as a “truth-teller.”

Just as Porter’s heroine Granny Weatherall creates the “ultimate agony” when she pins “[her] faith on formal systems or an external order that is not natural to one’s spirit,” so Porter likewise ends up, like Granny, suffering profoundly for her false expectations and her misplaced loyalties. In an effort to make her publisher fulfill the imagined role she had created for him, she tragically pinned her faith on a man who was bound to disappoint her. Although in the tradition of the gentleman publisher Donald Brace was expert at cultivating trust and intimacy with his authors, he was by necessity a businessmen first and a dear personal friend second.

Porter is decidedly more realistic when expressing an almost a maternal concern for Eudora Welty’s welfare. Porter advises her friend not to make decisions to bow to an “artificial demand” if doing so would in any way compromise her “alive and flourishing talent.” She warns Welty against feeling obligated to publishers who, she implies, will apply pressure to obtain a novel, without concern for the writer as an artist or as a person. Not surprisingly, in writing Porter is able to assess the truth of her own predicament while issuing a warning to others and perhaps sending a spiteful message to publishers. Clearly, on some level Porter admitted that she had compromised both her peace of mind.

---

3 Unrue, Truth and Vision 220.
and perhaps her artistry when she consented to walk into the "trap" set by her publishers. True to the discrepancy between the "truth teller" and the private individual, Porter was able to assess the impure intentions of the "authoritarian" publishers in writing; in her personal life, however, she had chosen to trust and embrace them. She would have been wise to accept as truth the penetrating advice she had offered so publicly to a friend.

* * *

Porter began her relationship with Harcourt, Brace in the late 1920s. At the time, she was under contract with Boni & Liveright to write a biography of Cotton Mather entitled *The Devil and Cotton Mather*. Porter’s contract with Liveright represented her first connection with an established publishing house, and her connection with the house was not regarded as exclusive. In June of 1929, Harcourt, Brace editor, Raymond Everitt, wrote to Porter while she was living in Bermuda. His motives were clear: “Your short stories have more than one admirer in Harcourt, Brace,” he flattered her and when you are free of other publishing obligations, we are rather hoping you will give us the opportunity of considering your books for our list. I have seen notes about *The Devil and Cotton Mather* and I am looking forward to reading it when a copy can be bought. If you feel inclined, we’d appreciate hearing what

---

5 Boni & Liveright was a publishing house known for its political and sexual radicalism. Louis Kronenberger began his career at the firm. He recalls the bohemian atmosphere of the house during the 1920s in his “Gambler in Publishing: Horace Liveright,” *Atlantic Monthly*, (January 1965): 94-104; also see Tom Dardis’s *Firebrand: The Life of Horace Liveright* (New York: Random House, 1995). Porter did not have a productive alliance with the house. They advanced her a total of $900 on her Cotton Mather biography, but she was unable to give them a completed draft of her manuscript. Porter did not develop a close alliance with Horace Liveright because he was businesslike and did not attempt to cultivate a warm friendship with her. Porter was also displeased that Horace Liveright failed to read her manuscript as she sent it. He explained to her that “it would take the edge off if I tried to read it in bits” (Horace Liveright to KAP, September 4, 1929, Annenberg Rare Book & Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania). In addition, Horace Liveright was impatient about Porter’s inability to meet deadlines, regardless of her illnesses or personal struggles, and he expressed his dismay this way: “Once more you ask for money on a book that should have been published long ago and which has been in our catalogue, counting this coming issue of the Fall catalogue, three times. In the meantime, another book on Cotton Mather has been published, the one which you reviewed and which, naturally, is going to hurt the sale of our book” (Horace Liveright to KAP, June 14, 1929, Annenberg Rare Book & Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania).
you are writing about next, and whether you like the idea of discussing our publishing for you.⁶

A year later, a handwritten letter from Raymond Everitt to Porter informed her that he was leaving Harcourt, Brace and also indicated that she had already contracted to write two books for the house, a book of her short stories, *Flowering Judas*, and a novel, *Thieves Market*. Before Everitt left the firm, he shared with Porter his admiration for her work and his opinion of her value to publishers. Her new contracts with Harcourt, Brace and the few short stories she had published in literary journals, he informed her, had paved the way for her entrance into the world of literary publishing: “You never need be afraid again of finding a publisher,” he assured her. “If you can produce a book occasionally, you are a real publishing property.”⁷

On September 11, 1930, Harcourt, Brace published her first slim volume of short stories, *Flowering Judas*. Raymond Everitt was shrewd in his assessment of Porter, who with the publication of one expensive looking limited edition (550 copies) of short stories was swiftly taking her place as one of the most valued new writers on the literary scene.⁸ Donald Brace and Alfred Harcourt, the men who founded Harcourt, Brace in 1919, were clearly pleased with their acquisition: “The news seems to have spread that you have come under our wing,” Harcourt wrote to Porter who was now living in Mexico, “for I have had the most extraordinary succession of letters from friends of yours and of ours congratulating us on starting to publish for you.”⁹

---

⁶ Raymond Everitt to KAP, June 25, 1929, KAP Papers.
⁷ Raymond Everitt to KAP, June 17, 1930, KAP Papers.
⁸ John D. Chase to KAP, August 25, 1930, KAP Papers.
⁹ Alfred Harcourt to KAP, June 26, 1930, KAP Papers.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Harcourt’s letters to Porter made clear his strategy to publish the writer’s first novel on the heels of her debut as a critically acclaimed short story writer. Her success as a short story writer, he explained, “means that when your novel comes, you’re set up not only from the critical point of view, but almost as a ‘collector’s item.’ How does that feel?” Harcourt’s anticipation and optimism were soon replaced by urgent inquiries. By March of 1931, and on so many other occasions, Harcourt wrote to Porter with the same question: “Won’t you tell me how it’s [the novel] getting along? Our plans for the autumn are taking shape and we’d like to know what we can count on. I do hope it will be ready in time.”

The recurring themes that would characterize Porter’s twenty-five year publishing alliance with Harcourt, Brace were established from the outset. Porter’s value as a literary commodity was clear from Raymond Everitt’s first attempt to acquire her for the house. The habit of using flattery, gentility, and a kind familiarity to please their client was established early on as well. Porter quickly became accustomed to being treated as an adored member of the Harcourt, Brace family. Harcourt, Brace employees were well trained in the art of cultivating and maintaining strong publisher-author alliances, and they were genuine in their admiration of Porter. She communicated with them about the details of her life, wherever and however she was living it at the time, and she grew dependent upon their kindness, solicitude, and frequent involvement in her practical as well as literary affairs.

Although Porter quickly grew accustomed to the perks of being one of Harcourt, Brace’s preferred authors, Raymond Everitt’s departure from the house betrayed the

---

10 Alfred Harcourt to KAP, September 24, 1930, KAP Papers.
11 Alfred Harcourt to KAP, March 30, 1931, KAP Papers.
notion that Harcourt, Brace employees and their authors operated in a tension-free environment. Although the fallout from internal politics within the house were masked, in part by the friendly professionalism of Harcourt, Brace employees, Everitt’s comments to Porter illustrate that employees naturally developed friendships with writers and that they did not always refrain from sharing confidences. Everitt, for instance, confided to Porter his assessment of Alfred Harcourt, describing the publisher as “a shrewd czar and no one must approach too near the throne.” The personal nature of Porter’s correspondence with members of the firm positioned her to witness from afar the undercurrents of dissatisfaction and the power struggles within the house. The dislocations within the firm’s hierarchy would ultimately prove exhausting for Porter’s editor, advocate, and friend, Donald Brace. Inevitably, the internal politics that plagued the company adversely affected employee morale and interfered with the continuity of author-editor alliances.

In addition to glimpsing the internal tensions within the firm from the outset, Porter would also become acutely aware of how her publishers were envisioning and strategizing her career as a Harcourt, Brace author. Even before agreeing to publish Porter’s short stories, Alfred Harcourt and Donald Brace were already planning to use the writer’s short stories as a marketing tool; her stories would be used to advertise and prepare the public for Katherine Anne Porter’s first novel. Both publishers eagerly anticipated their client’s swift transformation from gifted short story writer into equally formidable novelist.

12 James M. Reid wrote a memoir about his days working in the Harcourt, Brace textbook department. He documents the power struggles and frequently shifting alliances that were a part of the firm’s history for years. See James M. Reid, *An Adventure in Textbooks: 1924-1960* (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1969), 81.
13 Raymond Everitt to KAP, June 17, 1930, KAP Papers.
A writer temperamentally and artistically unsuited to creating long fiction, Porter found herself in a difficult position. The critical acclaim she had earned from her short stories had secured her affiliation with a reputable publishing house. She needed such an alliance with a well-established house because she expected to obtain advance money from her publishers, and from the beginning she wanted to believe that her direct and cordial relations with them would justify her inclination to trust them to protect her professional interests. She also wanted to believe that they would provide a measure of financial security, a safety net of sorts, that she could not expect from husbands or family, and she therefore looked to them to bail her out of the occasional financial crisis.\textsuperscript{15} In 1933, Harcourt, Brace would buy out of her contractual obligation to Boni & Liveright when they offered to pay $500 to release her from the Mather contract.\textsuperscript{16} Porter, aware of her value as a “publishing property,” developed the expectation that her publishers would provide financially whenever she made clear that her needs were desperate.

Porter thus established a pattern of indebtedness to the firm early on. She would rarely find herself in the black, a state of affairs that reminded her of her father’s incompetence and of her own dreams to make something of her life, despite his example. Ever-looming deadlines, failure to produce a novel, and indebtedness all eroded her sense of artistic independence and dignity. Professional pride, love of writing, and commitment to vocation were also diminished when she succumbed to feelings of self-recrimination and humiliation.

\textsuperscript{14} Reid 85, 86.
\textsuperscript{15} In a moment of anger and resentment, Porter told her sister Gay, with whom she was close, that the family had in her view never been there for her when she had needed them: “As for being a family to me, when were you ever? I should have been dead in a ditch years ago if I had depended on my family to exhibit any of the old-timey characteristics” (KAP to Gay Holloway Porter, January 30, 1932, KAP Papers, cited by Walsh 168).
\textsuperscript{16} Donald Brace to KAP, January 5, 1934, KAP Papers.
As time wore on, Porter’s offerings of short stories continually served as reminders of contracts she had not fulfilled. The small masterpieces that in an ideal world should have been hailed and appreciated as her true art were published only after it became clear that there would be no novel to precede their publication. Her books of short stories and short novels did not erase her debt. Nor did they placate her publishers, who continually shared with her their determination to transform her artistry: “Somehow I believe incorrigibly,” Harcourt wrote to her, “that you’re going to be a novelist and [I] look forward with the warmest anticipation to a shelfful of your books on our list some day.” A shelf full of unprofitable, albeit exquisite, volumes of short stories, in other words, might prompt rave reviews from critics, but from a business standpoint, her publishers would nevertheless be disappointed. The message sent to Porter from the earliest days of her alliance with Harcourt, Brace was loud, clear, and unrelenting.

Knowing the pressure and expectations Porter faced from her publishers, one wonders why she felt drawn to cultivate and sustain such loyal bonds with them, particularly because she willingly remained loyal to her publishers for far longer than her husbands and lovers. Porter’s intellectual biographer, Janice Stout, explains:

Porter’s relations with men were troubled and troubling to her life. They have proved troublesome to biographers and literary critics as well in that they seem to convey a frivolousness or shallowness strikingly at odds with the thoughtfulness of her work. Flannery O’Connor commented, with her wry understatement, “I gather she has a way” with men. Porter was married, it is usually said, four times. Sometimes she said three. The truth has recently been established as five marriages. . . . Besides her marriages she had numerous love affairs, some perhaps casual, but many of them passionate to an exhausting degree. She fell violently in love on short acquaintance, idolized the lover and idealized the relationship while it lasted, then fell just as violently out of love, denouncing the man as abuser, a worthless bore, a cruel heartbreaker, a betrayer.18

17 Alfred Harcourt to KAP, April 20, 1932, KAP Papers.
18 Stout 172, 173; also see Givner, A Life 49-51.
Porter delighted in the roses and the occasional bottle of champagne her publishers sent her on holidays or on her birthday, in particular because these gestures were a symbol of the stability of a long-term alliance and did not represent passionate gestures associated with romance and sexual intimacy. As Thomas Walsh has explored in *Katherine Anne Porter and Mexico*, Porter’s “Oedipus relation to her father may best explain her preoccupation with frigidity, rape, fear of pregnancy, revenge, and hatred between the sexes that recur in her notes, essays, and fiction.” In developing relationships with publishers, Porter was able to bypass unhealthy and transient alliances with men to form bonds based upon faith in her as an artist. To have strong men in her life who unlike her father were willing to offer her praise and approbation for her strongest commitment throughout her life, writing, was to find relief, an oasis of support in a troubling world. She could always rely upon a stream of goodwill and support from her publishers, traits that were particularly comforting during times when she strayed from her true vocation and found herself embroiled in the emotional upheaval and exhaustion that characterized her romantic interludes.

There are other reasons why Porter would have been attracted to her publishers as figures she could depend upon to behave exactly as her father had not, as providers, as trustworthy friends, as advocates, and as gentlemen. In her fiction, she rarely portrayed her male characters as sympathetic, honorable, or able to fulfill their familial responsibilities. Rather, her male characters continually betray her own preoccupation with men who hurt women, as in the case of Granny Weatherall, who suffered the humiliation of being jilted by the man she loved on her wedding day. There are also the

---

19 Walsh xiv.
male relatives who fritter away Sophia Jane’s fortunes in *The Old Order*, described as “selfish, careless, unloving creatures [who] lived and ended as they had begun.” Porter also portrays the father of her semi-autobiographical heroine, Miranda, as emotionally distant and as only capable of conditional love. In *Old Mortality*, we see that Miranda’s father raises his girls in a convent after his wife’s death. He cancels visits to their great disappointment when the nuns report bad behavior, and he cannot forgive his daughter when she escapes the captivity of the convent to marry foolishly at eighteen.

Men who chose publishing as a profession were of a different ilk than either Porter’s troubled father or her fictional male characters, as they had gravitated toward a profession where the qualities of responsibility, ethics, and loyalty were highly regarded and actively preserved in more traditional and established houses like Charles Scribner’s Sons and Henry Holt & Company. As a self-described southern belle and member of a fictional aristocratic southern family, Porter would naturally be inclined to respond positively when confronted by businessmen like Donald Brace and Alfred Harcourt, both of whom learned their trade under the mentorship of Henry Holt, “the living symbol of the Old Guard,” whom publishing historian John Tebbel describes as “irascible,” a man who “resisted change in the industry as much as he resisted the opinions of others.” Henry Holt’s cranky nature and “pigheadedness” were grounded in his contempt for his fellow publishers, many of whom he believed had abandoned ethics, literary quality, and loyalty toward authors in a relentless pursuit of profits.

Alfred Harcourt and Donald Brace both began their careers in publishing right out of college when they came to work for Henry Holt & Company. They worked there until

---

1919, when Alfred Harcourt, then a brilliant editor, decided to establish his own firm, bringing Donald Brace, production chief at Henry Holt, with him. Although Alfred Harcourt had grown frustrated with Holt's conservative literary tastes—one of the reasons he chose to establish his own firm—he and Brace nevertheless respected their mentor; they earned respectability within the publishing world because both men adhered to the principles of publishing ethics that their mentor had fought so passionately to preserve.²²

Renowned as one of the most conservative publishers in the business, Holt ascribed to industry standards established during the Gilded Age. Publishing historian Charles Madison captures the way publishers responded to the wealth and acquisitiveness of the age:

If the gilded age was characterized by crass materialism in the counting room and pseudogenteelism in the parlor, its established publishers—some of them sons of the pious "pirates"—strived earnestly to further works of artistic merit and to do business in accord with ethical ideals. They sought financial success, of course, but as gentlemen. Most of them were well-educated, interested in the arts and sciences, and ready to cooperate with their competitors toward the good of the industry.²³

In keeping with the lofty business principles established by the nineteenth-century gentlemen publishers, Henry Holt instructed his staff never to lure an author away from another publisher. In addition, he insisted on good writing and would not publish any writer who did not meet his literary standards. In June 1889, Holt made his views clear to English critic and publisher, Arthur Waugh, whom he had employed to represent his

---

²² Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing*, Vol. IV, 162-69; James M. Reid explains that Donald Brace and Alfred Harcourt had promised one another "no nepotism" within their firm since Henry Holt's elevation of his sons within Henry Holt & Co. had frustrated both men and damaged company morale. Years later Harcourt would create friction within the firm when he elevated his son, Hastings Harcourt.

firm in Great Britain: “I don’t think I’ve made you understand yet that I didn’t publish anything that I didn’t think is good, no matter how it expected to sell.”

In 1910, during the twilight of his publishing years when he absented himself from the office for long periods of time, Holt made the highly competent and ambitious Alfred Harcourt manager of his trade department. Despite his frequent absences, Holt did not relinquish the reins of power but instead continued to manage the house, make crucial decisions about books, and mentor his “assistants.” The letters of “instruction and indoctrination” he began to write to Alfred Harcourt during this period, according to Charles Madison, “make a lively text for the education of a publisher.” In one instance when Harcourt wanted to drop an author he feared would be unprofitable, Holt insisted that it “is worth our while to lose some time, tissue and money on him, for the sake of the luster he’ll cast on our list.” Later in life when looking back upon his career, Harcourt recalled what Henry Holt had meant to him as a mentor:

I know he [Henry Holt] watched the progress of Harcourt, Brace and Company with interest; words of praise reached my ears. I always cared for him, and I know that the fifteen years I had with him, at first absorbing his ideas, then developing my own, gave me invaluable training, even when I was struggling with what seemed unreasonable conservatism. Nothing “half baked” or shoddy could get by Henry Holt.

Holt’s insistence upon considering quality above salability influenced Alfred Harcourt and Donald Brace and perhaps motivated them to remain loyal to Porter, a writer whose rare talent added “luster” to their lists but who nevertheless accumulated debt rather than profits. When Alfred Harcourt and Donald Brace decided to start their own firm, they combined the wisdom that they had learned from Henry Holt with their

24 Qtd. in Madison, Book Publishing in America 105.
25 Qtd. in Madison, Book Publishing in America 231.
own ambitions to publish a new generation of writers. In his privately published memoir about his early days in the publishing business, Alfred Harcourt explains his motivation for starting his own firm:

When I started Harcourt, Brace and Company, I expected to have a lot of fun, and I hoped to build a sound, small business which would give me a decent living. The contemporary scene interested me intensely, and I wanted to publish books that reflected it. I wanted to give a hearing to the writers who were writing as individuals with a fresh point of view, not merely following a literary tradition of the past.27

Harcourt and Brace succeeded in their mission to publish authors with wide-ranging intellectual interests while at the same time building a sound business. They earned most of their profits from their textbook division, but at the same time they remained committed for over a quarter of a century to publishing writers like Porter; she cost the firm money both in advances and in the labor required to support so many areas of her life, literary, psychological, and practical.28 While it was important for the Harcourt, Brace image to maintain strong ties with writers of literary prominence like Porter, she also gained a certain status and exposure from an affiliation with them. By the 1920s, Harcourt, Brace boasted an impressive list of authors and was profiting from a “decade of dynamic achievement and financial success.”29

27 Harcourt 69, 70.
28 A History of Harcourt Brace & Company: 75 Years of Publishing Excellence (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1994) contains information about the history of the company and the development of the textbook division, but the book was never published formally and distributed, so copies are rare. There is also no author for this booklet; Reid points out that while the trade department suffered during the depression years, “the Text Department was surging ahead with such a powerful up-thrust that only one year--1932, at the very depth of the Depression--failed to show an increase” (Reid 36); in Some Experiences, Alfred Harcourt explains that because “the ideal of universal education is so ingrained in this country, textbooks are a staple commodity, and when a book is used as a textbook in some of our great school systems, its sales make the usual ‘best seller’ figure look insignificant” (Harcourt 103).
29 Madison, Book Publishing in America 342; Reid describes the success of the firm during the early twenties: “In five short years since its founding,” he explains, “HB had built a remarkable image. It was an inestimable advantage to the infant textbook department. First of all, it was an image of success, compounded by Sinclair Lewis’s Main Street and his other big sellers. There was John Maynard Keynes and his vastly admired Economic Consequences of Peace” (Reid 11, 12).
In addition to the prestige associated with becoming a Harcourt, Brace author, Porter would recognize immediately that Alfred Harcourt and Donald Brace were ambitious to mold her talent but also willing to earn her trust and friendship. Although Alfred Harcourt praised and was solicitous of Porter, he was also known for his ruthless efficiency when it came to business. The "balding man of iron with a gentle and mild exterior," Donald Brace, quite naturally took over the substantial responsibility of handling Porter's affairs. During a visit with Porter in Paris in 1933, Brace established himself as her primary connection with the house. Their bond lasted until his death from lung cancer in September of 1955.

Perhaps Porter saw in Brace a kinder, milder, and even more solicitous man than Alfred Harcourt, with whom she had communicated regularly since she joined the firm. From 1933 on, Porter remained loyal to Harcourt, Brace during times of extreme tension and unhappiness because she would not disappoint Brace. It was Brace who in 1933 had made Porter feel at home within the firm: "I was delighted at seeing you," she wrote to him after their visit in Paris, "and feel solidly settled after our conversations." Brace possessed a clear talent for making writers like Porter feel settled and well published. His acquisition of British writers including E.M. Forster, Virginia and Leonard Woolf, Roger Fry, and Clive Bell further demonstrate his ability to charm writers. In an extraordinary tribute to Donald Brace, T.S. Eliot stated: "No American publisher was better known and better liked in the literary world of my generation. . . . And they will remember most

30 Alfred Harcourt elucidates his practical approach to running a business in his memoir: "The policy of recognizing a mistake and doing something about it seems to me basic for every part of a business. If, over a reasonable period of time, a department continues to lose money, or some person isn't making a real place for himself, I believe something should be done promptly to try to correct the situation even if that something has to be drastic" (Harcourt 74).
31 Reid 10.
32 KAP to Donald Brace, November 22, 1933, KAP Papers.
gratefully the confidence which he inspired as a publisher, by his combination of Yankee shrewdness, loyalty to his author’s interests, and sweetness of temper.”

Donald Brace undoubtedly possessed the interpersonal skills necessary to make Porter feel secure within and loyal to the firm. At the same time, Brace’s “Yankee shrewdness” was manifested in his attempt to ensure that Porter habituate herself to dealing with her publishers directly, without the intervention of an agent. While visiting Porter in Paris in 1933, Brace solidified his personal and professional relationship with Porter, and he convinced her not to use the services of an agent.

During the months prior to his visit, Porter had agreed to employ Raymond Everitt as her agent. After leaving his position as editor at Harcourt, Brace, Everitt, in his own words, had “gone and turned into an agent—of all the things a publisher does not do.” After relying upon Everitt to help dissolve her Liveright contract for the Cotton Mather biography, Porter decided after a visit with Brace that she wished to deal directly with her publishers. Everitt was understandably miffed at her change of heart: “We will not be put in the position of being called an intermediary,” he admonished her,

in the sense of being a nuisance value between a publisher and an author, with a thought in your mind that for doing practically nothing we take 10% off the sums you get. A good agent performs a much more useful function, acts as your business representative, smooths out all commercial difficulties, keeps you more closely in touch with your publisher, but only in editorial matters and over a period of time makes a great deal more money for you.

Everitt’s assessment of the usefulness of an agent was accurate. Good agents would help writers to handle their practical affairs, which included ensuring that their clients signed

---

35 Porter admitted to Cyrilly Abels years later that Donald Brace had convinced her not to use the services of an agent. KAP to Cyrilly Abels, undated postcard, KAP Papers.
36 Raymond Everett to KAP, 1930, KAP Papers.
37 Raymond Everitt to KAP, December 6, 1933, KAP Papers.
favorable contracts. But they knew better than to interfere with the author-publisher bond. Porter, apparently more willing to trust her publisher, chose to please Donald Brace, to whom she sent a copy of the rejection letter she had written to Everitt.

Brace, clearly expecting and pleased with the turn of events, then offered to perform many of the services Porter might have expected from an agent: "As I told you in Paris," he wrote to her, "I hope you will ask us whenever there are any services you would like some one here to perform."38 Porter was quick to take him up on his offer. Within a few months, she was asking Brace to do what was really the work of an agent. She had him sending a short story around to different magazines with the expectation of getting it published. The story, "That Tree," was not easily placed, but Brace was quick to reassure her: "We are more than pleased to try to sell the story for you or to do any other things of that sort."39

Donald Brace, in effect, made clear to Porter that Harcourt, Brace employees would go out of their way to meet the various needs and requests of their client. Given Brace’s seeming willingness to perform without a fee all of the services an agent might, it is not surprising that Porter, somewhat naïve and new to the business, would begin to view agents as superfluous. Porter was clearly more than eager to accept Brace’s hospitality and to regard him as her main contact at the house. She easily disregarded

38 Donald Brace to KAP, December 8, 1933, KAP Papers; Harcourt, Brace seemed to have a policy of keeping agents at bay. In 1950, Raymond Everitt again tried to work with Porter, and this time he elicited the anger of Harcourt, Brace editor, Eugene Reynal, who informed him that his interference was inappropriate and might potentially "interfere" with "author relations." He said that he had told Miss Porter that "we should be perfectly willing to make an arrangement with you for the handling of some of these rights, but that arrangement is between you and us and not you and her." He also admonished Everitt, telling him that if he "would like to represent her in respect to these rights we are the people to be approached in the first instance and not her" (Eugene Reynal to Raymond Everitt, June 15, 1951, KAP Papers).
39 KAP to Donald Brace, January 8, 1934, KAP Papers, and Donald Brace to KAP, January 25, 1934, KAP Papers.
Everitt’s admonition that agents would effectively handle all business aspects of her relationships with publishers, eventually earning more money for her and freeing up her time to write. Above all, Porter wanted to establish a direct one-on-one alliance with Brace because it gave her a sense of security and stability to believe that he was devoted to her as more than a business associate. He would offer friendship, of course, but he would also, she thought, address her concerns directly, protect and look out for her best interests, and meet her requests for practical assistance.

In choosing to work for one of the new generation of publishers who established their houses during the bohemian twenties, Porter had positioned herself to work with publishing professionals who were less conservative in their literary tastes than their predecessors but also close to their nineteenth-century roots because they cultivated meaningful ties with their authors and exuded the qualities of gentility, loyalty, and trustworthiness. The careers of publishers like Donald Brace, Alfred Harcourt, Max Perkins, Bennett Cerf, Donald Klopfer, and later Seymour Lawrence confirm that well into the twentieth century there were still publishing professionals who respected the high standards of excellence promoted by men like Henry Holt and Walter Hines Page.

It is not difficult to understand why Porter was easily seduced into eschewing the services of an agent in order to form exclusive bonds with publishing professionals who offered her praise, respect, and constancy. These men, in the interests of good business, cultivated with their best writers author-editor alliances grounded in a life-long, familial

---

loyalty. After sending Porter fifty dollars during a time of need, editor Charles Pearce
intimately expressed his genuine concern and affection:

I like to think that our usefulness in such matters is as consoling to you as the
thought of you is consoling to us on many occasions. It is only because you are
so very far away that I am able to break down occasionally and say the things I
say, but I do think that you are a rare and wonderful person. I wish your troubles
were tangible and here; I wish your troubles were people and bullies, and then
perhaps we could deal with them all for you swiftly and efficiently.41

Alfred Harcourt, Donald Brace, and other employees at the firm like Charles Pearce
extended themselves to Porter in ways that her father in particular never had; without
hesitation, she responded to their overtures.

During the first ten years of working with a major publishing house between 1930
and 1940, Porter grew dependent upon publishers who were consistently willing to buoy
her spirits and advance her money. It should be noted that their willingness to advance
Porter money during the Depression years was a testament to their eagerness to see her
produce. During the Depression, most publishing houses, including Scribner’s, were
denying their authors that luxury.42 At the same time that Porter was enjoying excellent
treatment from her publishers, she was also by necessity developing ingrained strategies
for coping with their unrelenting demands and expectations for a novel. She understood
that her status within the Harcourt, Brace family depended upon her cooperation with
their business strategy. She therefore established methods of coping with the reality that
her entire creative agenda had been defined by publishers who cared more about training

41 Charles Pearce to KAP, January 31, 1938, KAP Papers.
42 In 1932, Maxwell Perkins explained to Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings that “these times are very adverse to
advances, and generally speaking, there is not occasion to pay one on a first novel, and we try to avoid even
small ones under present conditions when so much credit has to be extended to the book trade all over the
country” (Tarr 76).
her into the habit of writing in the genre of their choice than they did about encouraging her to develop her intuitive creative powers.

As we have seen, Alfred Harcourt and Donald Brace had their hearts set on a novel from the outset, and they were concerned with every opportunity or misfortune she confronted insofar as these events influenced the progress of the manuscript. When Porter won a Guggenheim fellowship with the help of her publishers in March of 1931, her publishers were pleased because it would relieve her of financial difficulties and enable her to finish the novel more expeditiously.\(^{43}\) The prospect of her winning a prize for a story she published in *Scribner's* likewise pleased Harcourt because “recognition of that sort will cheer you up and get you going on the novel.”\(^{44}\)

By 1933, however, everyone working with Porter was growing impatient. In the absence of a novel, Brace used an occasion to visit Porter in Paris to discuss the Cotton Mather biography. She was eager to refocus her energy and the energy of her publishers onto a different project that would both distract them from the novel and potentially make some money. She convinced Brace that she would have the project completed within a reasonable amount of time, and Harcourt, Brace eagerly bought out her contract from Liveright.\(^{45}\)

Almost immediately, the pressure for her to finish the manuscript began. Brace wrote to Porter that he was “eager for the time when I can read the whole thing from beginning to end. There is no doubt that the book will be fine and important, and we are

\(^{43}\) Alfred Harcourt explained to Porter that if she won the Guggenheim, she would receive a stipend of $2,500 for a year. With that amount he expected that she would have the novel done and would be on to her next writing project (Alfred Harcourt to KAP, November 12, 1930, KAP Papers).

\(^{44}\) Alfred Harcourt to KAP, April 20, 1932, KAP Papers.

\(^{45}\) Donald Brace to KAP, January 5, 1934, KAP Papers.
all very happy about it." In January of 1934, Brace followed up: "I have made the contract call for delivery in nine months just to fix an outside date; I know you expect to have the manuscript finished sooner than that." By April, however, Porter was reporting that she had been ill with influenza for six weeks and was on her way to a sanitarium to rest for three more weeks.

Porter's publishers remained optimistic. In April, Harcourt, Brace editor Charles Pearce was writing to express his hope that they would be receiving the Mather manuscript in time for fall publication. In addition, he conveyed his expectation of bringing out an expanded version of *Flowering Judas*, including new stories with the old ones. If possible, he also wished she could have the novel ready so that they could publish the short stories in connection with the novel. In May of 1934, Brace was relieved to find himself reading and enjoying sections of manuscript that he believed were part of a novel in progress; instead, these stories would eventually be published as some of her best short fiction. In an effort to give her the praise he knew she needed to continue, he informed her that "they are beautifully done, and the writing gives me a new standard by which to measure so much of the current writing I am having to read all the time." He was also echoing Pearce when he pushed her to gather material for an expanded book of short stories and when he expressed pleasure in response to Porter's assurances that she would give him the Mather manuscript in time for fall publication.

---

46 Donald Brace to KAP, December 8, 1933, KAP Papers.
47 Donald Brace to KAP, January 5, 1934, KAP Papers.
48 KAP to Donald Brace, April 9, 1934, KAP Papers.
49 Charles Pearce to KAP, April 19, 1934, KAP Papers.
50 Stout 249.
51 Donald Brace to KAP, May 10, 1934, KAP Papers.
In February of 1934, Pearce had not received any manuscripts. He wrote to Porter that, in the absence of the novel or the Mather manuscript, they would publish "a collection of stories including Flowering Judas and all the others, whenever you can send us a manuscript."\textsuperscript{52} *Flowering Judas and Other Stories* was published in 1935 to wonderful reviews, but each letter brought more urgent inquiries about the novel and the Mather manuscript.

The Mather project clearly interested Porter, and she meant to write about the Puritans in the same vein as Van Wyck Brooks and Mathew Josephson, literary historians who "convicted the Puritans as a source of America's moral ills."\textsuperscript{53} But writing a scholarly biography would swiftly become an overwhelming task. She had chosen a difficult genre, and her standards were high. The project was unwieldy, moreover, and required perusal of hundreds of history books as well as primary source materials. A Mather biography, in short, would have been a challenge even for a trained biographer or historian. In a letter to Pearce written on February 27, 1935, Porter's veneer of confidence cracked:

The Cotton Mather goes on a little, then hangs for God knows how long, but that is because of my own hesitations about my judgment of his character and motives, my constant learning of new things about him, and my disgust with hack biographies, a dash of Freud, a touch of scandal, a re-scrambling of the evidence to make a new effect without having to say anything really. . . . I can't abide it. This has got to be complete and historically accurate, no snap judgments. . . .\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{52} Charles Pearce to KAP, February 16, 1934, KAP Papers.
\textsuperscript{53} Walsh 110. Walsh acknowledges that Porter's interest in Cotton Mather seems odd; he explains her childhood interest in witches and voodoo doctors and her adverse reaction to New England, a place that put the "fear of God" in her (Walsh 110, 111).
\textsuperscript{54} KAP to Charles Pearce, February 27, 1935, KAP Papers.
Her difficulty with the project tormented her, and her frustrations were magnified because of the humiliation she felt when season after season her publishers advertised the book, only to be disappointed.

In September of 1935, she again reported to Pearce and explained that the summer of productivity she so expected had been an unqualified disappointment: "The Cotton Mather gets on a page at a time. I shall do my best, but I am more discouraged than I can say at the making constantly promises as constantly broken. That is not my notion of the right kind of constancy." Her sense of desperation was clearly mounting when she wrote to Pearce the following November that she needed yet another deadline extension: "I have made an agreement with myself to write nothing else until that is finished. Hardly even letters. It is going to be a completely unbearable weight if I don't get rid of it soon. So everything else is going by the board. I have really wanted to finish this book, I cannot explain why it has been almost impossible to finish."

Finally, Porter escaped marital life with Eugene Pressly and left her beloved Paris behind, returning to Boston in 1936 with the intention of finishing the biography at last. Porter found marriage stifling, and she often linked her inability to write with the challenges of marital obligations. Separation from Pressly, though, did not mean that the writer magically found the inner resources needed to finish the Mather project; instead, she abandoned the project soon after returning to the United States. She bypassed Pearce and wrote directly to Alfred Harcourt in March of 1936:

---

55 KAP to Charles Pearce, September 7, 1935, KAP Papers.
56 KAP to Charles Pearce, November 14, 1935, KAP Papers.
57 For information regarding Porter's divorce from Eugene Pressly and her reckless marriage to Albert Erskine, business manager of the Southern Review, soon afterward in 1938, see Stout 126-28.
I have deceived myself into believing that I could force myself into the state of mind necessary to work on a project that has too long been a burden on me, a burden that has become an obsession. It threatens to obstruct all my other plans, I cannot work at it, and yet I am so preoccupied and worried with it I cannot work at other things either. . . . I am convinced I must put it away, forget about it for a while as nearly as I can, and go on with my other things. Otherwise I begin to fear there may be nothing at all, for my nervous tension grows proportionally with my inexplicable resistance to writing this book. . . . I am demoralized by keeping promises I cannot keep, there is nothing worse really; and I must do other work that has been kept waiting too long by the stubborn fact of this book which is no longer a project of work for me, but a kind of nightmare. . . . You will understand without my saying that I feel my situation as to my contracts and agreements is not a light matter; I say this for the sake of adding that I do not wish to change them, or annul them, or fail to fulfill my part of them. So I ask you to let them stand, but let me, as well, do whatever comes first with me, for then, I believe, it would be possible for me to finish most of the things I have planned so long, and all half-finished. By a sort of compulsion I work on my stories and the novel before working on the biography.58

The Mather manuscript had indeed been causing Porter a great deal of tension while she was living in Paris with Eugene Pressly. Pressly probably correctly attributed much of the tension in their marriage to her everyday struggles with a manuscript that he nevertheless told her would “be very epoch-making in your life and your literary career.”59

While living in Europe, Porter had failed to complete both the novel and the Mather manuscript; instead, she wrote some of her most important short fiction, including “Hacienda,” “The Grave,” “The Circus,” and sections of “ Noon Wine.” After returning to the United States, she continued her streak of writing brilliant stories. Shortly after freeing herself from the Mather contract and separating herself from married life, she resumed her true calling. While living in isolation in the Water Wheel Tavern in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, Porter felt free to put to paper the stories that had been

58 KAP to Alfred Harcourt, March 28, 1936, KAP Papers.
59 Albert Erskine to KAP, February 6, 1936, KAP Papers, cited in Stout 104.
gestating for years in her imagination. Once liberated from a project that she had aptly described as a “nightmare,” she rapidly completed “Noon Wine” and “Old Mortality.” After moving to Louisiana, she finished “Pale Horse, Pale Rider,” a long story that, according to Janice Stout, she had “worked on intermittently for some years.”

Her publishers were thrilled with the stories. Pearce wrote of “Old Mortality” that it was “without a doubt, one of the most absorbing and beautiful narratives” that he had ever read: “It is astonishingly good, even to one who knows the rest of your work intimately and likes it well. If you continue to out-do yourself in this way, I will run out of adjectives.” In putting off her commitments to write in the genres that were so unsuitable to her natural abilities, Porter managed to produce the fiction that would solidify her literary reputation once and for all.

Even though Porter could not help but receive praise for her short fiction, the publication of a new volume of short stories, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939), far from satisfied the demands of her publishers. The frustration, anxiety, and personal disappointment that she felt while trying to complete the biography during the mid 1930s, moreover, had been acute and prolonged by the amount of time it took her to acknowledge that, for her, the project was unrealistic and unsuitable. Ironically, Porter had been responsible for reviving a project that she had been struggling with on and off since the late 1920s. She had convinced herself that it would enhance her reputation, make a profit, and deflect attention away from the novel.

The Cotton Mather episode thus illuminates the strategies and patterns Porter was developing for coping with the demands of her publishers. In committing to projects that

---

60 Stout 106.
61 Charles Pearce to KAP, December 23, 1936, KAP Papers.
went against the grain of her natural talents, she elicited temporary excitement and attention from her publishers. But in the long run she only further compromised her reputation by failing to deliver yet another manuscript. An agent might have helped her to negotiate the severing or postponing of contracts and thereby protected her from positioning herself as weak, undisciplined, and overwhelmed.

Instead, she communicated with her publishers directly and with painful honesty. She exposed herself as afraid of incurring their displeasure, and she revealed a lack of discipline and judgment. The confessional and self-revelatory tone she assumed was designed to elicit sympathy rather than to earn respect, and she did succeed, temporarily, in getting her publishers to empathize with her. The Mather incident, however, initiated a destructive cycle of apologies, supplications, and later on ineffective bursts of anger and recrimination against friends and professional associates whom she would begin to resent. Her pattern of using false promises to keep her publishers expectant and interested only diminished her credibility, weakened her bargaining power, and disappointed her publishers, who nevertheless continued to control her creative agenda.

Porter was not only developing a self-defeating habit of positioning herself as irresponsible and defensive about contracts that should never have been formalized in the first place, but she was also developing a practice of lying habitually about her progress. While at times Porter did think that she would finish an assignment within the time she had given her publishers, there were also instances when she exaggerated her progress in order to quiet the inquiries of curious friends or to receive more advances. Her publishers played along because they wanted to believe their client, and they were fond of deluding
themselves into thinking that they could politely badger her into productivity, regardless of how clear it had become that no completed manuscript was coming their way.

Janice Stout has noted that this “pattern of promises and delays had emerged early in her career.” This behavior began in the early 1920s in Mexico when Porter would lead friends and magazine editors to believe that books or articles were close to completion when in actuality they were either late or nowhere near completion.62 The conduct became a good deal more serious, and the repercussions became graver, once Porter initiated this behavior with publishers who were blinded by their ambitions for her and would therefore encourage her to sign contracts that would produce performance anxiety and insecurity but never the inspiration that eventually translates into a completed manuscript.

By 1940, Porter’s frustration with her failures at Harcourt, Brace manifested itself in her threat to leave the company. The idea of shifting to another house promised relief, and she began to communicate with other publishers, including Random House and Doubleday, Doran and Company. Porter’s old friend, Donald Elder, worked at Doubleday and eagerly courted Porter, promising that he could find a legitimate way to buy out her contracts with Harcourt, Brace, if she was indeed very unhappy and ready to leave them.63

Since Porter’s correspondence during this period is missing, it is difficult to discern all the reasons why Porter suddenly decided to break from Harcourt, Brace. Certainly she was seeking escape from the pressure of the constant surveillance from Brace and others and relief from the humiliation of her history of missing deadlines and

---

62 Stout 200.
63 Donald Elder to KAP, December 6, 1940, KAP Papers.
accumulating debt. Helen Taylor of the publicity department represented a tender approach to coping with an unproductive writer: “I want you to know that we all understand your not finishing the book and we love you dearly.” Lambert Davis was not so gentle in his approach. “There was no disguising the fact that I was shocked to get your letter about difficulties on the novel,” he told her.

By December of 1940, Porter was not able to quiet the demanding voices of Brace and others with a novel, but she was at a breaking point and ready to terminate professional relations with them. She finally lost patience over a relatively small affair concerning a misunderstanding about an advance. She had been corresponding with editor Lambert Davis, as Donald Brace was ill, and a decision was made to send her only half of a five-hundred-dollar advance she was expecting and apparently depending upon. Alfred Harcourt had decided to send the remaining two hundred and fifty dollars only after the manuscript had been delivered, “largely to define to you how essential the delivery of the novel was to all our plans.” Her attempt to break with the company set off alarms immediately, and Harcourt took over coping with the crisis until Brace could reenter the picture and solve the problem definitively.

Harcourt’s response to Porter’s letter stating she wanted to leave Harcourt, Brace set the tone for how the two men would ensure that she would not defect to another publisher. Harcourt began by telling Porter that he did not think he could be “dog-in-the-manger” about an author, but he found that he could not be anything else with her: “We have given devoted attention to your work for a good many years, and the idea of publishing your novel has not only gratified us beyond words, but we have built our

---

64 Helen Taylor to KAP, 1940, KAP Papers.
65 Lambert Davis to KAP, September 16, 1940, KAP Papers.
spring list around it until it is too deep in the fiber of our plans to be pulled out without tearing vital tissues." In one sentence, Harcourt conveyed to Porter that his publishing house would have a disastrous spring without her promised book. By referring to the "tearing of vital tissues," he evoked the feminine metaphor of childbearing to convey the inordinately painful and wrenching results her betrayal would represent to her publishers, who had clearly gone beyond their call of duty already in their efforts to accommodate her and invest in her ultimate success.

Three days later, Harcourt stated in another letter that he now remembered a part of the argument against her leaving that he had forgotten to mention in his previous letter. He directly shifted the argument to the issue of author-publisher loyalty and his conviction that her leaving without consulting Brace would constitute an unforgivable act of betrayal. His persuasive words were meant to evoke a sense of guilt and almost shame in Porter. After stressing Brace's illness "through no fault of his own" and the fact that he has been "your great friend and admirer for years"--feeling that her problems were "his special concern"--Harcourt then articulated the heart of his argument. He pleaded with her to wait at least until Brace was well enough to speak for himself. "In ordinary matters," he wrote, "decisions are made in the absence of one or the other of us, but this is no ordinary matter. Don would inevitably feel that something had gone wrong between us when his back was turned, and I know you could not contemplate such

---

66 Alfred Harcourt to KAP, November 22, 1940, KAP Papers.
67 Alfred Harcourt to KAP, November 22, 1940, KAP Papers.
68 Harcourt Brace was not as dependent upon trade books for its financial well-being as Alfred Harcourt would have had Porter believe. In light of the shift from trade books to textbook publishing, Alfred Harcourt was exaggerating his company's dependence upon Porter's expected novel. By 1930, their textbook department "finally did become profitable, and it went on to carry the company through the Depression era of the 1930s. . . . In 1939 it was reported that the company's sale of textbooks now exceeded its sale of trade books. This was a turning point for the firm; never again would the majority of its sales be in trade books" (A History of Harcourt Brace & Company 15).
unintentional cruelty.” Harcourt’s style of arguing was ingenious and cruel itself by his method of making business relations so completely personal that one would think Porter was being accused of trying to betray unfairly a father or husband. Harcourt, threatened with the possibility of losing a valuable author, allowed his hardheaded business personality to emerge. He would not hesitate to manipulate Porter’s emotions in an effort to remind her sternly of her obligation to remain loyal to the firm.

The more subtle aspects of Harcourt’s argument included examples of authors who had left Harcourt, Brace like Elinor Wylie, who then later admitted to regretting it. And finally, after evoking an image of a misguided female writer who regretted her decision to leave the cloak of Harcourt, Brace, he concluded with the promise to send “whatever amount is needed to provide you with the security to complete the novel.” He had, in essence, offered informally to buy back an author he perceived as too valuable a commodity to let slip away. In addition, he also tried to convey subtly to Porter that, like Wylie, she was a dependent female in a harsh and competitive publishing world. Porter may have thought that she could succeed without Harcourt, Brace, but Alfred Harcourt wanted to make clear to his client that she was not considering how much her ultimate success was linked to publishers who had showed and would continue to show inordinate patience and loyalty toward her.

Harcourt concluded with a twist of words that attempted to soften the piercing nature of his previous comments. He claimed that the check he was willing to send was “simply a way of restating the faith all of us have in your work regardless of who publishes it. And we don’t want you to be under any financial pressure while the whole

---

69 Alfred Harcourt to KAP, November 25, 1940, KAP Papers.
70 Alfred Harcourt to KAP, November 25, 1940, KAP Papers.
question of our relations is being reappraised." Of course Porter's attempt to break with her publishers precisely centered on their concern with who published her novel. Each time they offered her another financial carrot, moreover, their requirements that she remain loyal became proportionally more adamant, albeit conveyed with disguised intensity.

When Brace regained his health sufficiently to take over where Harcourt left off, he immediately built his argument firmly on his contention that Harcourt, Brace had acted as a family would to her. He allied himself with the values adopted by the nineteenth-century gentlemen publishers, making clear to Porter that authors should be treated like family and that loyalty toward them was paramount. Brace spoke of his utter distress at coming back from his sick leave only to find her asking to be released:

There has never been an author in whom I have felt greater interest or whose work it has been a greater satisfaction to publish. That feeling has always been shared by everyone else here. I should have thought that any problem, any distress or need of yours could be frankly talked about and satisfactorily dealt with without any difficulty after all these years. I still think that ought to be the solution.72

Brace's contention, then, was that it was perfectly appropriate that the personal side of their relationship should dictate the business side. He had no trouble with meeting each crisis as it arose in order to achieve his larger goal of keeping her as one of their authors and eventually reaping the benefits associated with publishing her first novel. By his own logic, his relationship with Porter should resemble that of a traditional relationship between a husband and his wife or daughter. Brace put himself in the position of a father/husband, devastated to learn that his wife or daughter was suffering because she did not feel comfortable coming to him with her problems.

---

71 Alfred Harcourt to KAP, November 25, 1940, KAP Papers.
He elaborated on this argument in the following paragraph when he asserted that her letter to Lambert Davis "seems to sum everything up":

In that letter you say that the human relationship here has always been of the very best sort. You go on to say that "some of it is my own feeling that I really could not ask for anything more at Harcourt Brace: on the business side things must be done in a businesslike way." Then you say you could not progress or survive under the arrangement. This must mean that your wish to be released is at bottom for financial reasons. Your saying that you could not ask for anything more here astonishes me. I cannot remember that anything you have asked for has ever been denied. Possibly we should have offered to advance money without being asked, but I had always thought that you preferred to get along on income and to ask for advances only when necessary. You could always have more money from us, and you can have more now. However, it does seem to me that that question should be dealt with fully and freely between us before you decide you want to go to another publisher.\(^73\)

Brace's tone here was one almost of admonishment, as he attempted to convey his utter shock at finding out that she was in any way intimidated by him or uncomfortable with disclosing her needs. Certainly honesty and a certain level of intimacy had characterized their relationship thus far, so how was it possible that she felt unable to communicate her needs and must therefore resolve the situation by terminating it? In addition, if the "human relationship" between them was positive, then why was she worried about the business side of her affairs, which rightfully should be the province of the publisher/husband? Here we see Brace encouraging Porter to leave the business side of her affairs to them. Her frustrations would all be resolved, he reassured her, as long as she felt comfortable communicating her needs.

After reminding Porter that the "personal side" of their alliance remained strong and intact, Brace then shifted the conversation toward business. He revealed the business strategy Harcourt, Brace had mapped out for Porter, explaining that, in publishing both

\(^73\) Donald Brace to KAP, December 4, 1940, KAP Papers.
Flowering Judas and Pale Horse, Pale Rider, they had put all their money into printing a limited number of splashy, well-presented editions that would whet the public’s appetite for her novel. Her novel was then expected to make back the business expenses the company had invested in the first two books. The crowning blow for Porter must have been his comment that, after they had deducted her royalty and printing costs from Pale Horse, Pale Rider, “we had a surplus exactly of $5.00 as a contribution toward all business expenses, plus a few bound and unbound copies paid for.”

He then summed up her obligations to the firm and again evoked responsibilities that were framed as familial:

In other words, for ten years, including our share of marginal rights, we have built our whole program toward the future, taking nothing out for expenses and nothing for profit. I mention all this only to bring out the point that the whole program has been based on faith in your future and on the belief that any contribution toward expenses and any profit to us would come out of that future. I don’t claim any credit; I think it was good business. Now, however, it appears that the future is about to be realized. You are nearing the completion of the novel we have so looked forward to for ten years. And now you ask to be released. Obviously, another publisher would be delighted to pay quite a lot to take over now, to reap where we have sown. Obviously also, another publisher might well be willing to pay still more for the satisfaction of taking Katherine Anne Porter away from Harcourt Brace. I wonder if you have realized these aspects of the request you are making? It’s a damned awkward time to ask for a divorce, just when we are about to have the long hoped-for baby.74

In this passage, Brace took the familial nature of Porter’s tie to Harcourt, Brace to a new level. He informed her that, if she turned her back upon them, she would be inflicting public humiliation. While rival houses might be willing to purchase her like a trophy wife for their own aggrandizement, they could never offer her the kind of trust and care her Harcourt, Brace family had shown her. In addition, his explanation that she had made no

73 Donald Brace to KAP, December 4, 1940, KAP Papers.
74 Donald Brace to KAP, December 4, 1940, KAP Papers.
profits to date was intended to make her fearful about her chances of survival without them. How could she conceive of herself as independent of them when they were willing to do so much for an author who had brought them so little financial reward?

In addition to being told that her publishers had spent close to ten years investing her future without making any profit from her work, she was then confronted with the analogy that her contract with Harcourt, Brace was akin to a marriage wherein the wife was, to date, barren. Her novel, then, was seen as their long-awaited child. Brace had, in effect, brought to its logical conclusion an argument that had begun with Harcourt’s assertion that her leaving would result in the tearing of “vital tissues” and ended with his accusation that her demand for a divorce without delivering a child first was an inexplicable act of betrayal.

In this incident, we see how desperate Brace was to win back Porter’s loyalty since his tactics for manipulating her emotions were less than honorable. On the surface, he appeared to be treating her as a member of his family, but his arguments against her leaving were meant to blackmail her emotionally into remaining wed to a situation from which she begged release. His intent to use familial loyalty, and the ploy of motherly obligation at that, showed how fine the line was between protecting business interests and maintaining the integrity of personal friendships. Viewed critically, Brace’s arguments—designed to influence Porter against her intuitive and practical intention to seek a divorce from her “literary husbands”—were overtly manipulative and a betrayal of the values of the gentleman publisher.

As independent as Porter was in her approach to her real marriages, when it came to her publishing family she gave Alfred Harcourt, and Donald Brace in particular,
the benefit of the doubt. Once Brace had done all he could to convince her to stay, moreover, he softened his tone, making any thoughts of leaving even more difficult: "I can’t tell you how much I regret all this turmoil for you," he wrote her. "I see now that from the clues I had I should have been able to put the whole together, but I failed to do so and I blame myself for that. Hereafter, if anything troubles you, promise to let me know."75 Reassured about her value to the firm and gratified that her publishers were still willing to invest in her, Porter acted out of a sense of obligation and an ingrained desire to please when she pledged to Brace a kind of devotion and fidelity her husbands could never expect. She agreed to remain with the house until Brace’s death or retirement.

Porter wrote to her friend Donald Elder at Doubleday to explain why she would not transfer her allegiance: "Don, she explained, "I have the worst kind of letter to write,"

and I might as well do it this minute. My present publishers have made every compromise possible, they have given me contracts I almost wrote myself, and they have been generous beyond description with money, and they have done the whole thing—or rather Mr. Brace has, for he is the life and direction of that house—with complete friendliness and lack of quibbling, and in fact they have taken all the words out of my mouth. I am going to stay with them because to go now would be sheer revenge and stubbornness, and I am not capable of either when I discover that the other side of the argument is more than willing to arrange things justly. What I told you was exactly true. I sincerely meant to go, I was in such a state of mind that I asked them several times not to make me an offer, not to argue, but to let me go. I did not use any offer I had as a lever, I have mentioned no publisher by name, and it was my firm intention to go. But when they behave as they have, it would be putting a premium on a human relationship, it would be on my conscience if I refused their genuine wish to repair the damages done, not by malice, but by simple lack of understanding of the real situation.76

75 Donald Brace to KAP, December 11, 1940, KAP Papers.
76 KAP to Donald Elder, December 18, 1940, KAP Papers.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Porter, who believed in loyalty as an ideal, internalized Brace's argument, and she apparently thought him correct in his insistence that she do the decent thing by remaining with the firm.  

Brace had, moreover, offered Porter the one sort of commitment to which she could pledge her fidelity. Brace's devotion to publishing Porter was grounded in his belief in her artistic abilities. He was also willing to back up his faith in her abilities with generous contracts. He informed her that he would be happy to advance her "up to $3000 on the novel, $1500 on the next book of stories, $1500 on the journal, and $1250 on the Cotton Mather." Porter found such faith in her potential difficult to resist; therefore, instead of rejecting his pleas as suffocating, she interpreted his covetousness as flattery. She wanted her publishers to treat her as family, and she wanted the house she worked with to feel like home. She also wanted to believe that she could depend upon Brace's paternalistic and unconditional support. She imagined that he would exhibit the qualities she always found lacking in her own father; he would be there for her during her darkest moments, she believed, and he would offer unquestioning understanding and sustenance during lean times. This family squabble, while tense, was therapeutic for the writer. In rejecting her publishers temporarily, she managed to elicit from them a renewal of their vows. She once again felt needed and important.  

The rhetorical strategies Brace had employed to maintain Porter's fidelity worked for the time being, in part because he had convinced her that "the human side in publishing . . . perhaps the most important, as between authors and publishers," was  

---

77 In a letter to literary friend Josephine Herbst, Porter said that the "one quality I value above everything in love—or in any other relation—is loyalty" (see KAP to Josephine Herbst, June 1, 1931, KAP Papers, published in Isabel Bayley, ed., Letters of Katherine Anne Porter (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1990), 43.  

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
“fine”: “Certainly no other [publisher] has the long investment of genuine interest, affection, understanding (I hope), belief in you as a person and as a writer that we have.”79 After launching an argument designed to produce the effect of tearing at her mental “vital tissues,” Brace abandoned his emotionally manipulative strategy and resumed his characteristically warm and diplomatic tone. He also resumed his gentle prodding, and his prose, as well as the bouquets he sent her, became sunny and flowery again. He was clearly eager to put this piece of unpleasant history behind them forever.

While the personal side of their relationship had been amicably resolved and both had reaffirmed their dedication and devotion to one another, the business side of their partnership lapsed into old habits of mutual deceit. The two-way veil of smoke-screening continued into a next stage of contract revisions wherein both parties made new promises for contracts and advances, as if both of them were willing to ignore Porter’s difficulty with the associated pressures.80 Brace was overly optimistic when he surmised that Porter had completed enough of the novel, book of stories, Cotton Mather biography, and “journals” to assume that “the time required to finish up all of them will not be very great.”81 It is surprising that by this time Brace could not read Porter’s habitual and deceptive claims to be further along than she really was a bit more discerningly,

78 Donald Brace to KAP, December 5, 1940, KAP Papers.
79 Donald Brace to KAP, December 4, 1940, KAP Papers.
80 Porter’s literary friend, Caroline Gordon, warned Porter about the dangers of accepting publishing advances, referring to herself as “the homespun Cassandra . . . always look[ing] on the dark side of things. I have been lying awake at night worrying about your situation. At first I was delighted over your recent adventures with the publisher but now I am worried.” Caroline then advised her not to accept a tempting advance: “It is too much money at one time. In fact the advance is out of proportion to your sales and your rate of production. And an advance is not something they give you, you know. They are gambling that your next book will sell big and the fact that they are investing so much money in you will certainly make them push you. But if the book doesn’t sell big you will be in a hell of a mess, in debt to Harcourt Brace for life. You will be so in debt to them that you will be in no position to bargain with them or any other publisher. This will depress you and make it hard for you to work” (Caroline Gordon to Katherine Anne Porter, undated, KAP Papers).
81 Donald Brace to KAP, December 5, 1940, KAP Papers.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
especially in light of her recent crisis with the Mather manuscript. While Brace’s enthusiasm might be viewed as encouraging, his unrealistic expectations and his willingness to create yet more paralyzing contracts were in reality counter productive. This kind of overreaching with a writer who had proved that she was unable to work under pressure only had the effect of driving Porter’s “nervous tension and fatigue” to greater levels.82

By the conclusion of a long and frustrating decade that had nonetheless given birth to her greatest stories, Porter might have logically been searching for an advocate who would help her to manage her relations with ever-demanding publishers. One might also assume that it would have been clear to her by then that commitments requiring her to turn away from short fiction were a burden that she could hardly sustain. If Porter had wanted to find an advocate willing to support her in remaining true to her innate talents, then she would have been wise to have accepted Diarmuid Russell’s offer to act as her agent in November and December of 1940, the months during which she wanted to defect from Harcourt, Brace.83 Russell approached Porter after Eudora Welty had assured him that she was “a good human being.”84

Had Porter embraced Diarmuid Russell’s offer to act as her agent, he probably would have advised her the same way he had advised Eudora Welty. Russell gave Welty the confidence to eschew publishers who would not agree to publish her short stories unless she would agree to transform herself prematurely and unnaturally into a novelist. Russell was unusual in his sensitivities towards artists, and he understood how pressuring them to stray from their true artistic mediums might produce anxiety and distort a writer’s

82 Donald Brace to KAP, December 4, 1940, KAP Papers.
83 Diarmuid Russell to KAP, December 5, 1940, KAP Papers.
creative vision. Had Porter chosen to work with an agent like Russell, her publishing
career would have taken a different shape, as it is unlikely that any publishing house
would have invested in her without promises that she would write a novel for them. Yet
one has only to observe the way Eudora Welty’s career started slowly and then
blossomed over time to imagine how Porter might have flourished under the patient and
unselfish mentorship of Russell.

Porter’s decision not to work with Russell but instead to reaffirm her loyalties to
her publishers meant that she would continue in her pattern of making promises she could
not keep and accepting advances she could not repay, all in exchange for the perceived
security of their continued financial, practical, and emotional support. After the crisis was
resolved in December of 1940, Brace wrote that he was “happy for you, that you feel
much more secure and straightened out, and I’m happy for us that we had the chance to
do it for you.” 85 While Porter worked on the novel at Yaddo, a writer’s retreat in
Saratoga Springs, New York, Brace continued to comfort Porter and was always ready to
offer assistance: “Do let me hear how you fare, when you can,” he wrote to her the
following March, “and let me know too whether there is anything I or we can do for
you.” 86

Porter sent Brace installments of the novel from Yaddo, and by the spring of 1941
he was confident enough to announce the book for the fall list. 87 By 1942, however,
Porter’s progress on the novel was lagging, and she was writing to her publishers about
the death of her father and other personal troubles. Her marriage to Albert Erskine was

84 Diarmuid Russell to KAP, September 10, 1940, KAP Papers.
85 Donald Brace to KAP, December 23, 1940, KAP Papers.
86 Donald Brace to KAP, March 18, 1941, KAP Papers.
87 Donald Brace to KAP, May 19, 1941, KAP Papers.
breaking up, predictably, and she traveled to Reno, Nevada, to obtain a divorce. Brace was hoping too much when he suggested that she might still be able to finish the novel while traveling from Reno to the University of Indiana and then to a writer's conference in Boulder, Colorado. He wrote to Porter that he was pleased that she was "serene and healthy." Acknowledging that the novel "keeps you uneasy," he nevertheless repeated his refrain that the "best cure will be to get it off your desk and into the mail and let us begin to work on it. Two more weeks will be fine."88

Brace and Porter seemed to have developed an unspoken understanding. He would allow himself to be strung along and naively optimistic about her progress, and she would rely upon him more and more as her editor, friend, and confidant, sharing with him the intimate details of her day-to-day struggles as she wrote about them from various outposts. Porter had made it clear that she wanted to work with Brace exclusively when possible, and he had agreed. On one occasion when Harcourt, Brace editor John Woodburn began to take over communications with her, she expressed concern. Brace was quick to reassure her: "Certainly it is not the case that anybody has been assigned to look after you," he explained. "John Woodburn showed me his correspondence with you. Of course he admires you enormously, but I have explained to him that you and I seem to get along perfectly well by ourselves without any help."89 There were many editors and employees from various departments who corresponded with Porter extensively over the years, but there was always the understanding that Brace was her primary contact when possible.90

---

88 Donald Brace to KAP, July 8, 1942, KAP Papers.
89 Donald Brace to KAP, January 14, 1943, KAP Papers.
90 During the post war years, Donald Brace became increasingly bogged down with internal politics at Harcourt, Brace, and he often took time off to nurse upper respiratory illnesses.
family for the writer, taking care of the practical requests she made, sorting her mail, and providing a solid home base for her as she lived through another decade of dislocation and upset.

Porter’s correspondence with Brace throughout the 1940s documents a decade of tumultuous personal problems including a short-lived love affair that ended painfully, multiple changes of location, and various attempts to make a living while trying to manage her always precarious health and finances.91 Brace diplomatically corresponded with her and gently nudged her throughout the decade. In the space of ten years, she not only sought a divorce from Albert Erskine, but she also bought a house that she could ill afford in Saratoga Springs, New York, worked as a script writer in Hollywood, lived in Manhattan, was appointed as a fellow at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., and taught as an artist in residence at Stanford University. Her letters document long bouts with pneumonia, financial worries and debacles, and depression, all compounded by her “vicious” cycle of obligation and debt to publishers. In her correspondence, she also chronicles her frustration with not being able live in one place with all of her belongings. Porter, in short, did not feel that she had firm ground beneath her feet; nor could she find the “pool of quiet serenity” that Brace correctly believed she needed in order to write.

Porter was living a chaotic and transient life without real direction, focus, or resolution to finish one task before beginning another. During the forties, her only publication was a book of short stories, *The Leaning Tower* (1944).92

---

91 In her chapter “The Love of a Lifetime,” Joan Givner describes Porter’s love affair with Charles Shannon (see Givner 330-45).
92 In the absence of a novel, Porter asked that they publish *The Leaning Tower*, and Brace agreed: “Yes, I agree with you that we had better go ahead now and bring out the collection of short stories, *The Leaning
was not a collection of new stories she had recently written but a gathering up of stories
she had written over the years to produce a long overdue book. Thus *The Leaning Tower*,
while cause for brief celebration, was only a reminder that another book of stories had
been published without the accompaniment of a novel. The young artist who once
dreamed of overcoming her father's worst proclivities for apathy, melancholy, and
irresponsible had secured herself a place of prominence as a writer among publishers
and critics; at the same time, she was constantly struggling against her personal demons
and failing to tame them.

In 1942, in an essay published in *Vogue* and later reprinted in her *Collected
Essays* called "The Charmed Life," Porter endows an old friend she knew in Mexico,
William Niven, with the very qualities of serenity, single-mindedness, and persistence
that eluded her. This piece illustrates the degree to which Porter was disappointed with
the way she was managing her life and pursuing her craft. The essay was written just two
years after she attempted to break with her publishers and tells us more about her state of
mind at the time that she wrote the piece than it conforms to the actual facts of the life of
William Niven, an archeologist she became friends with in Mexico and upon whom the
essay is based. Porter met Niven during her first visit to Mexico in 1920. In her essay,
Porter distorts the actual facts of her friend's life to fit the fictional story she wants to tell
twenty years after their original encounters.  

---

*Tower*. There is no use being obstinate about the original plan for a novel first, short stories second" (Donald Brace to KAP, April 24, 1944, KAP Papers).

93 Thomas Walsh points out that Porter sacrifices the complexity of Niven's life in order to portray him in
the way she wanted to remember him, and he also gives us the real facts about Niven's life (see Walsh 22-24);
for more information about the actual life of William Niven, see Roland H. Harrison and Robert
Sigfrid Wicks, eds., *Buried Cities, Forgotten Gods: William Niven's Life of Discovery and Revolution in
interested in Indian culture, and not an artist, Porter used him to illustrate certain qualities she then believed the artist should ideally possess.

The portrait she painted of Niven, who remains unnamed in the essay, was one of an eighty-year-old man who had forsaken all family ties and connections to live completely devoted to his “one interest in life: discovering and digging up buried Indian cities all over the country.” He was not tied down to conventional ways, lived amidst disorder on the top floor of a building that looked like a shack, and ate “carelessly at odd hours.” Although Niven is not technically an artist, we see from the outset that Porter admires him because he possesses the ability to focus exclusively on his one passion, which is to discover as many archeological artifacts as possible. Porter not only admires his single-minded approach to his work, but she envies him “for his wholeness,” which she compares with her “own life full of foolish and unnecessary complications.”94 “Wholeness,” she implies, encompasses the ability to simplify one’s life so that complete focus and concentration upon one’s passion, or art, can be achieved.

Niven scales down his existence to the bare minimum, choosing to live without “family ties and not missing them, a happy, devoted man who had known his mind, had got what he wanted in life, and was satisfied with it.”95 Porter emphasizes the gravity of his decision to abandon his family to live in Mexico when she describes his wife’s beauty, her devotedness, and their five sons. In Niven, then, Porter creates an old man who lives independently, simply, and with a hardheaded and self-centered dedication to vocation.

Perhaps painfully aware of the lack of honesty that permeated her own complex professional alliances and also aware that she had compromised her artistic freedom, she created a man who was passionately honest and true to his own ambitions. Niven possessed exactly the kind of inner fortitude, discipline, honesty, and resolution that she so wanted to possess but sorely lacked. Her fictional Niven, in a sense, was living her dream when he naturally and guiltlessly renounced every earthly comfort and human tie so that he could be completely free to pursue his passion as an excavator.

Thus while it is unrealistic to think Porter capable of the sacrifices she attributes to Niven, her imaginative vision of the unburdened and independent artist contrasts sharply with the turbulence of her personal life and her reliance upon publishers. Instead of providing real comfort to Porter, her publishing family elicited from her a stream of letters documenting the mental and physical stress of being caught in a "vicious cycle" of creative paralysis, economic hardship, and indebtedness. It is not surprising, then, that she created a man "charmed" by virtue of the ease with which he renounced unapologetically both creature comforts and social obligations, sacrifices that Porter was unable to make for her own art.

At the conclusion of a long and unproductive decade, Porter was working at Stanford University as an artist in residence, and she felt that absolutely nothing about her life was charmed. As usual, she was frustrated by her inability to teach and work on her own writing simultaneously, and her letters to Brace make clear that she had "really reached the end of something." She conveys to Brace her discouragement, exhaustion, and her "unspeakably ghastly" living situation, wherein her small apartment afforded her little protection from eager and intrusive students. She rebelled against living where she

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
was “considered by some as something in a zoo, and by others as public property.” In a moment of defeat, she looked to Brace, hoping to elicit from him a rescue instinct: “I have to be protected a little somehow by something,” she pleaded, “four walls two or three flights of stairs up in a big city like New York seem like the answer.” If she wanted to write, she told him, she simply had to put “an end to this perfectly vicious cycle in which I have found myself for so long... There is no good in my trying to say to myself any longer that I can finish the novel, or do any of the other work I have in mind in notes and in contract, unless I can get some security and freedom from distraction for a fixed time.” She then declared that she was “unwilling even to try to go on with my work in such conditions”:

Already the invitations to spend the next year troupimg from one university to another, one writer’s conference to another, are coming in, and I am refusing them as they come, for they are of no earthly good to me. I need besides five hundred dollars at least 1000 dollars to get settled, and for six months I should like 400 a month; by that time you will have the novel and it might b [sic] published by then: all the manuscript you have represents less than seven months work in all, under the most evil conditions: I could finish if I were not bedevilled [sic] for a little while. ... It is not good, asking you for these advances when these things have simply come to a crisis. I need to be steadied really for a long enough time to collect myself and work without distraction.96

As this episode illustrates, Porter was looking to her publishers for more and more support as time passed. Her history of informing them about one crisis after another, however, made it increasingly difficult for them to offer substantial support to meet her needs although they did give her advance money intermittently.

Brace was no longer as solicitous and generous as he was in 1942, when he took the initiative of suggesting that her “present agonies” might be relieved if she accepted

96 KAP to Donald Brace, September 12, 1949, KAP Papers.
advances “every month for a while” until the novel was completed.\textsuperscript{97} By the early 1950s, Porter’s feeling that her publishers had not helped her enough had turned to bitterness and feelings of betrayal. In her view, Brace had not followed through on the promises he had made in 1940 to treat her like family and to help her whenever possible. After reading over a letter from Brace written in 1944, wherein he apologized for not having found a way to help her through a “miserable winter,” Porter, nine years later, scribbled a bitter note the bottom of the page in pen. She writes that he had been her “friend and publisher . . . for now 23 years. And yes it is true, he could never think of anything at all to do for me!”\textsuperscript{98} This scribbled note illustrates the unrealistic expectations Porter had of her “friend and publisher” and the degree to which the writer had interpreted her publisher’s pledges to help her in a deadly serious way. The passage of time had apparently not blunted her expectations.

As her vulnerability and sense of personal failure increased, so too did the frequency of her complaints and the severity of her judgments. Her belief that she had been wronged was compounded by Brace’s inability to correspond with her regularly. He and Porter shared their bronchial troubles in common, and they often discussed their respective illnesses. Although Brace had been warned by his doctor to give up smoking, he acknowledged that he did not have the strength to quit.\textsuperscript{99} His energy was drained further by the necessity of his involvement in the unfortunate and ever-present power

\textsuperscript{97} Donald Brace to KAP, October 6, 1942, KAP Papers.
\textsuperscript{98} Donald Brace to KAP, March 17, 1944, KAP Papers; Porter dated her scribbled note at the bottom of this letter July 7, 1953.
\textsuperscript{99} Author and editor often discussed their respiratory illnesses, and Brace on one occasion said that he was impressed with the list of things Porter was giving up for her health: “I certainly sympathize with you about cigarettes. My doctor urged me firmly to give up smoking, but I paid no attention. I honestly don’t believe that giving up cigarettes will make any difference; I am not convinced that they are responsible for any of my trouble. However, to be completely honest, I don’t believe I could stop completely without more agony than I dare contemplate” (Donald Brace to KAP, April 8, 1948, KAP Papers).
struggles that plagued the firm. By the early 1950s, Brace was officially retired, but he nevertheless still came to the office. During this last phase of his life, he continued to read Porter's letters, but he was less and less involved with answering her concerns directly. Her frustrations with the firm seemed to grow proportionally with his diminished role in her affairs.

When Porter returned to New York from Palo Alto, California, she did not stay there long but instead left for France for an extended visit. She had been invited to Paris to speak and take part in the American delegation to the conference in Paris for the recently formed Congress for Cultural Freedom. Her time in New York City did not represent the freedom from stress and worry she had yearned to attain—with the help of Harcourt, Brace’s committed financial support—in her letters to Brace from Stanford. Instead, her letters to Eugene Reynal at Harcourt, Brace document her litany of frustrations with how her publishers seemingly refused to help her make money from her already published writings. She told editor Eugene Reynal that she felt that there were “all sorts of possibilities” that might have been exploited if they had only been “properly handled” by “a good agent.”

The writer’s dissatisfaction with Harcourt, Brace’s handling of her published writings and her realization that she had little or no control over her publishing affairs became the central theme of her correspondence with publishers as she moved frequently between 1950 and 1955. During these years, Porter spent time in New York, France, the University of Michigan, and Liége, Belgium, before she would settle down in Southbury, Connecticut, where she would finally begin the odyssey of finishing Ship of Fools. By

---

100 Reid 122.
101 Givner 382.
1952, her letters from France to her correspondents at Harcourt, Brace were frequent and frantic. She had been suggesting that her stories be published in cheap and affordable paperback editions, that they be sold to Hollywood if possible, and that they be promoted more in other countries, including England and France.\textsuperscript{103}

She was writing long letters to editors Eugene Reynal, Robert Giroux, and Catherine Carver almost daily and finally addressed Donald Brace directly, refusing to let him remain in the background: "I have written about all this both to Eugene and Bob," she explained, "but they seem not inclined to take any steps about any of it, and there is perhaps no real reason why they should. The situation and various arrangements existed and were made long before they came to HBCO: I am just afraid that you are The Man Who, in this case, so let me tell you my troubles." Porter was upset that Harcourt, Brace's Paris agent had done nothing to promote her:

\begin{quote}
We may as well face the fact that Mrs. Bradley [Harcourt, Brace's agent] has too many high powered best sellers to look out for to take any interest in affairs miniscule as mine. But they need not remain so small if only I could have someone interested in my work and would like to sell all the subsidiary rights possible. There are many such rights that have never been touched and will never be so long as Mrs. Bradley just sits on them. There is a very fine agency here, with two extremely intelligent, knowledgeable women in early middle life who are anxious to act as my agents; I have talked to them several times, and they are very direct and straight and not wildly optimistic: they just do know a few effective things to do about my work here, and would be glad to undertake it. Why is there any objection to my taking them as agents? And does any obstacle really exist in my contracts? After all, I know many writers who do not have their publisher's agents in foreign countries or even their own, and how I got into such an uncomfortable place I really do not know.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{102} KAP to Eugene Reynal, March 21, 1951, KAP Papers.
\textsuperscript{103} Jason Epstein describes the reasons why he was inspired to create the paperback series, Anchor Books, while working at Doubleday. During the 1950s, many books Epstein and others had read in college were only affordable in hardcover editions. Anchor books sought to publish influential titles in affordable paperback editions. He also briefly discusses the phenomenon of other paperback firms, including Penguin. Porter wanted very much to be included in this paperback revolution. See the chapter, "Young Man from the Provinces," in Epstein 39-67.
Porter then gave more examples of how her representation in both the U.S. and in England was poor, her affairs stymied by “unbreakable” and unprofitable arrangements.

In summing up, she directly confronts the ingrained Harcourt, Brace strategy of relying exclusively upon the ever-elusive novel for profits. "I am discouraged to death," she tells Brace:

I am writing this as my very last hope, and if nothing is done, why then, I am done, too. I can at any time take a job as lecturer in a college or University, I can at any time go on troup ing the country lecturing, I can write articles until kingdom come for any number of magazines, but you see, I've been doing all that all these years to support myself while trying to write, and I am exhausted. I am exhausted and I am sick of the utter endlessness of the prospect. I know, everyone says, “finish the novel and your financial troubles will be over.” I am going to finish it, in between other jobs, of teaching, lecturing, writing. But if what I have already published had been handled properly by some one who really knew how to use all the possibilities, I shouldn’t have had to go on to this point of despair. I do not in the least despair. I do not in the least despair about my writing. I believe I am as good a writer as I ever was, whatever that was. If I had to live my bloody horrible life over again, and it was necessary to do what I did in order to write a little, I would do it again. You will never know a more unrepentant artist that I am. But it just does seem to me that this strange impasse I am in is not necessary. I am not willing to suffer anything if there is any way at all permissible to avoid it.104

Porter was not entirely unjustified in her complaints. A good agent may well have retained the author’s rights to her stories and done a great deal more to make money for her with her already published stories. In contrast, Harcourt, Brace’s policy from the outset had been to give their client the minimum amount of advance money as she requested it until she completed a novel. Brace had not been as generous over the years in supporting Porter as she expected he would be. Prompting their own agents to exploit all opportunities on her behalf, moreover, was simply not a priority.

In 1940 Diramuid Russell had warned Porter of exactly the kinds of struggles she would eventually encounter if she failed to employ the services of an agent, and his
predictions had come true. He had explained to her that when “publishers get an author without an agent they handle these rights and very often charge exorbitant commissions.”

He continued:

These commissions are not only exorbitant under any circumstances but they are made even more so by the fact that publishing houses are not normally equipped to put in much work selling these rights. Options are always “on terms to be arranged.” It is by no means an uncommon practice for publishers to put in option clauses “on similar terms.” This is completely unfair and ties the author to the publisher in such a manner that the author can do nothing. Indeed Porter did feel helpless. Now that Brace was no longer there to soothe and reassure her, she began to examine her situation more objectively, and she determined that Brace had not looked out for her best interests as an agent might have and that her affairs had been sorely neglected. The writer who had once been eager to hand over her business concerns to her editor and publisher was finally able to see the results of her laissez-faire attitude; she was furious at herself for having relinquished control.

Ironically, Porter’s sense of vulnerability and helplessness made her more dependent upon her Harcourt, Brace family than ever. Catherine Carver helped Porter in ways that extended well beyond her duties as an editor. While Porter was still living in France, for instance, Carver worked along with the writer’s niece, Ann, to find her an apartment in Manhattan. Carver’s duties as a correspondent were even more draining, as the line between editor, friend, and counselor quickly became blurred. Carver found herself reading and responding to letters wherein Porter’s descriptions of depression were frequent, alarming, and included references to suicide. She wrote a typical description

---

104 KAP to Donald Brace, July 27, 1952, KAP Papers.
105 Diarmuid Russell to KAP, September 10, 1940, KAP Papers.
106 Porter wrote to Carver from Belgium frequently about her illnesses and her frequent bouts of depression. She writes, for example: “I am at the point of such utter despair I should like to leave this world” (KAP to Carver, January 28, 1988, KAP Papers).
of her misery to her editor from Paris: "Everything descends on me like a black cloud," she explained, "but a very solid cloud with the weight and pervasiveness of a ton of dough or wet concrete or some very dull and palpable stuff."\textsuperscript{107}

Not only had Porter's feelings for Brace turned sour, filling her with self-disgust and recriminations, but she had begun to speak about the futility of writing, her "continuous, central interest and preoccupation of a lifetime."\textsuperscript{108} Even completing the smallest jobs like a preface for the book of critical essays Carver was helping to edit seemed an impossible and useless task. The book of critical essays and personal reminiscences and reflections, \textit{The Days Before} (1952), had come to represent defeat. The book was planned in the absence of any fiction and thus represented to Porter a long period during which she had been unsuccessful in responding to the "artificial demand" of her publishers.

Porter told Carver that it was not the book itself so much that bothered her as the fact that she had "finished in a state of peonage, hopelessly in debt, with all my rights signed away without even knowing I had done it, and never being told until I found it out by bits and pieces here and there." Although she claimed that she still felt good about her writing, she had only negative things to say about certain essays in the book that she thought should have been better, and she declared in the same letter to Carver that she was "entirely sick to death of everything having to do with writing." She claimed that she had not written the preface because she had "nothing to say" and that "three or four

\textsuperscript{107} KAP to Catherine Carver, August 22, 1952, KAP Papers.
versions have just gone in the waste basket because it seems just so entirely useless to try
to convey anything in words."\(^{109}\)

In her frustration and despair, Porter had forgotten the inspiration conveyed in some of the essays included in *The Days Before*, wherein she described instances of writers who had persisted in developing their talents despite the challenges posed by outward circumstances and internal demons. In her essay about Katherine Mansfield, for instance, she expressed admiration for the way this troubled and gifted writer had overcome personal travail in order to create: "I judge her work to have been to a great degree a matter of intelligent use of her faculties, a conscious practice of hard-won craftsmanship, a triumph of discipline over the unruly circumstances and confusions of her personal life and over certain destructive elements in her own nature."\(^{110}\) Of Ford Madox Ford, she testified

that he led an existence of marvelous discomfort, of insecurity, of deep and pressing anxiety as to his daily bread; but no matter where he was, what his sufferings were, he sat down daily and wrote, in his crabbed fine hand, with pen,

\(^{109}\) KAP to Carver, July 12, 1952, KAP Papers; On another occasion, Porter wrote to Carver that all "this whole collection represents such a struggle for survival, for expression, such difficulties trying to make something whole out of fragments of time and energy, such loss and waste, as makes me even now deathly tired to remember. So I mean to cut it away from me once and for all and let it float out and lose itself from me, and have its own life" (KAP to Catherine Carver, June 3, 1952, KAP Papers). The letters between Porter and Carver document a very rocky relationship. Author and editor became the closest of friends, but both eventually disappointed one another. Porter at one point told Carver that she had been experiencing a nervous breakdown, and she tried to apologize to her editor for making her a "Wailing Wall" (KAP to Carver, December 23, KAP Papers). Carver was shaken on several occasions because coping with Porter's despair was so difficult and draining, and she tried to distance herself from her client in various ways. On one occasion, Carver wrote to Porter that she had been "more disturbed than I can easily tell you by our recent conversations: not just by how troubled you were, though I feel that keenly enough, but by a certain failure of nerve they give rise to in me. . . . I have made it clear to Harcourt that I can't and won't deal with you in business matters; both they and you see that I have no talent for it. I really am useless to you except perhaps in small literary things: I hope you will depend on me for them and for the rest, let me be a private friend" (Carver to KAP, December 1952, KAP Papers).

\(^{110}\) In this essay, Porter discusses Mansfield's tragic suicide at Fountainbleau at the age of thirty-three. Porter presents Mansfield's death as a suicide, but Professor Nancy Gray brought to my attention that Mansfield died of a lung hemorrhage. See Porter, "The Art of Katherine Mansfield" in *Collected Essays* 49, 50.
the book he was working on at the moment; and I never knew him when he was not working on a book."111

Often, we see Porter more clearly through reading her descriptions of others. Her emphasis upon the trials faced by her contemporaries remind us of her early resolution to combat in herself the qualities in her father that she deplored. We know that Porter aspired to be the kind of writer who would keep producing, despite the "unruly circumstances and confusions of her personal life" and the "destructive elements in her own nature."

Yet during the early 1950s Porter’s correspondence reveals that she had lost faith in the value of her clear, poetic, and insightful prose. The myriad letters describing her precarious state of mind should make us glad she never chose the path of Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf. Certainly she identified with the despair that plagued these artists and with Katherine Mansfield’s "mysterious loss of faith in her own gifts and faculties."112 What kept Porter going was the part of her that could see the beauty of the world in glimpses, even when her world darkened. In her descriptions of Woolf, we experience Porter on the upswing as she celebrates the triumph of another woman writer grounded in her vocation and fearless in her pursuit of artistic expression. Woolf, according to Porter, "lived in the naturalness of her vocation. The world of the arts was her native territory; she ranged freely under her own sky, speaking her mother tongue fearlessly. She was at home in that place as much as anyone ever was."113 Porter’s career may have been marked by long periods of frustration and creative "silences," but she rarely gave up all hope that her life would improve. She always seemed to fall back on


Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
an inner faith in her own abilities that never completely failed her. Ultimately, the writer’s “love of the world” came from the intermittent joy she felt when she was truly living “in the naturalness of her vocation.”

Although Porter’s commitment to writing faltered occasionally, that commitment was so strong that she always found a way to rekindle her enthusiasm for her chosen vocation. Nevertheless, during the first half of the 1950s a pervasive attitude of defeat, depression, and humiliation haunted her correspondence, especially with Catherine Carver, who on several occasions had to distance herself from an extremely touchy and emotionally draining author-editor alliance. Porter was unusually melancholic during the first half of the 1950s, in part because she was beginning to examine her publishing history and the current disorder of her professional life with an unusual degree of honesty. She made a penetrating insight when she explained to Carver that she was “always putting the most appalling amounts of time and energy in trying to get living into some kind of order and keep it so. . . . And look at all that confusion! The only order I ever achieved was in my writing, and believe me, as you know well by now, that took some doing, too.”

In her personal life, Porter was trying in vain to find a solution to the disorder of her existence, and she was also assessing the failures of her publishing history. Although she could see clearly the ways that she felt Brace had misled her and failed to protect her interests, she was still unwilling to take responsibility for all aspects of her own participation in creating her current troubles. While her publishers had been unmerciful and unrelenting in their demands over the years, they had made their expectations clear from the outset. Yet Porter did not take responsibility for having unwisely blended her
personal life with her professional life. She did not acknowledge that her expectations of her publisher had been unrealistic and that her decision to put her complete faith and trust in Donald Brace had been unwise, inevitably leading to disappointment and disillusionment. She did not, in other words, look "clearly and courageously" at her own failure of judgment.115 Thus while in her fiction Porter confronted truths and created order admirably, she simply could not replicate the same success in her personal life.

In a letter to Carver, she described her publishing career as "one of the gloomier failures of my time; what mis-led [sic] me were all those bushels of praising reviews and critical pieces."116 More to the point, Porter had been misled by the flattering familial overtures her publishers had offered her over the years in an effort to ensure her loyalty and encourage productivity. She had allowed herself to believe that their financial support would continue without causing friction, and she had accepted their advances with gratitude, interpreting their "generosity" as a sign of their unconditional support. Now she merely felt humiliated, betrayed, and ready to make a change.

In keeping with her attempt to examine her circumstances realistically, Porter decided to give up the charade of pretending that she could work at teaching or lecturing while simultaneously trying to fulfill her publishing contracts. Once Porter returned from Paris, she explained to Carver that she no longer intended to perpetuate the fiction that she could survive as an artist without a regular job. She explained with disgust and resignation her decision to Carver:

At least I shall be using that part of my life and capabilities that are in my own hands, I can control it somewhat, and not just be used as a commodity of doubtful value, or as a stick for somebody to beat somebody else with, or as a disputed old

114 KAP to Carver, June 27, 1952, KAP Papers.
116 KAP to Carver, All Saints, 1954, KAP Papers.
bone and not a very juicy one. So now I'm long gone about my own business, what is left of it to me.117

Porter’s humiliation with regard to her loss of control over her affairs and her “dismal” publishing record was compounded by her belief that her status within her Harcourt, Brace family had diminished. She was no longer able to conceive of herself in the role of preferred client, one who had been fussed over by a nurturing publishing family for years. She now felt that her publishers regarded her as a property, one of “doubtful” value. All she had now, according to her logic, was the ability to control her status as “commodity.” One way to do that was to deny her publishers their power over her by refusing to fulfill her contracts. She preferred this option to continuing the cycle of lies regarding her ever-impending productivity.

Some months later, she wrote to Brace to formalize her decision. From now on, she would forget about fulfilling her contracts in order to devote her full attention to teaching jobs and a text book project, all activities geared toward relieving her psychologically crushing debt.118 It was after Porter informed Brace of her decision that she felt inspired to write “A Defense Of Circe” for Cyrilly Abels, then managing editor at Mademoiselle. Even though she had a lot of work associated with her teaching job at the University of Michigan, she felt as if she had shed her old skin and really “come into a new phase, a fresh state of mind.” It does not seem a coincidence that Porter would write “A Defense of Circe” just after she had come to terms with her inability to work while depending upon Harcourt, Brace for some level of security. While she told Carver in her letter of March 1954 about her dismay that the Circe piece had been cut for publication,

117 KAP to Carver, December 23, 1952, KAP Papers.
118 KAP to Donald Brace, September 9, 1953, KAP Papers.
nothing could interfere with the pleasure she felt in writing it.\textsuperscript{119} The feelings she had at Michigan were that of experiencing a kind of "anarchic" freedom. She felt liberated, not because she had free time, but because she had made the bold decision to formally ignore her contracts.

In choosing to write a creative piece defending the demi-goddess, Circe, Porter was using the medium of her craft to express a truth about her relations with publishers. She used Circe to imagine her way out of the years she had spent struggling within the confines of professional arrangements that conjured up images of imprisonment. When writing to Brace to inform him of her plans to abandon her contracts and to repay her advances as she could, she told her editor that she was stepping out of her "cell." In leaving her "cell" to "really live in the world," she was rejecting conventional publishing alliances wherein she felt pressured to mold her creativity to suit commercial demands.\textsuperscript{120} Although she did not confront the truth of her own complicity in her creative incarceration, she did, perhaps legitimately, feel the urge to imagine herself freed from the crushing pressure that her publishers had exerted over her creative agenda year after year and despite their knowledge that, as an artist and as a fragile person, she had been tormented constantly while trying to conform to their expectations.

Porter’s Circe possessed none of the author’s frustrations and vulnerabilities. She was a strong, dismissive, and witty goddess: "Of sunlight and sea water was her divine nature made, and her unique power as goddess was that she could reveal to men the truth about themselves by showing to each man himself in his true shape according to his

\textsuperscript{119} KAP to Carver, March 21, 1954, KAP Papers.
\textsuperscript{120} KAP to Donald Brace, September 9, 1952, KAP Papers.
inmost nature. For this she was rightly dreaded and feared.”121 Porter’s Circe was neither evil nor vindictive but delightful, truth-loving, and wickedly humorous. In her playful way, Circe feeds Odysseus’s men with “honeyed food” that causes them to “reveal themselves”:

Not even a god, having once formed a man, can make a swine of him. That is for him to choose. Circe’s honeyed food with the lulling drug in it caused them to reveal themselves. The delicate-minded goddess touched them then with her wand, the wand of transforming truth, and penned the groaning, grunting, weeping, bewildered creatures in the sty back of the hall. In the whole episode she showed one touch of witty malice, when she tossed them a handful of acorns and other victuals suitable to their new condition. No doubt she did it smilingly with her natural grace; what else could she have offered them at that moment? I think it was very good of her to go on feeding them at all. But then I am only human.122

In this passage, we see Porter creating a goddess capable of revealing to Odysseus’s men aspects of their swinish natures, the very characteristics they would have been loath to acknowledge without the help of this clever and deceptive goddess.

If we read this passage with Porter’s point of view in mind and with regard to the emotions she was feeling toward her publishers, we see the writer imagining herself through Circe as capable of revealing to them the truth about a publishing strategy that had been inflexible, counter productive, even inhumane at times. For years, Donald Brace and others had breezily presided over her tumultuous and painful affairs in the same way that Circe breezily presides over her anguished guests. Alfred Harcourt and Donald Brace had been persistent in using the writer’s mounting debt and ill-conceived contractual obligations as tools to prod her into productivity, and Brace constantly reiterated his refrain that Porter’s only salvation was to complete the novel. Porter thus

uses Circe as an imaginative response to the publishers who for so long had exercised such a stranglehold over her affairs and her emotions. If we imagine Porter as Circe for a moment, we see her gleefully throwing scraps to her publishers and for once imagining how it would feel to be in the position of power, of dispensing rather than receiving sustenance, however meager.

We can thus read Porter’s imagined Circe as a commentary upon her understanding of the selfish intentions of her publishers, intentions that she might have responded to more shrewdly had she regarded her professional associates as businessmen first and foremost. Now looking back bitterly over more than twenty years marked more by stagnation than productivity, she had come to regard the strategies of her publishers as swinish; she was no longer susceptible to being wooed by them into compliance with their ambitions. She was more apt to want to “pen” them “groaning” and “grunting” “back of the hall” than she was willing to accept any attempts at reconciliation as flattery.

While as a mortal being Porter could not work Circe’s magic, she could use the medium of her craft to explore her own feelings of powerlessness and resentment. Writing Circe would help her to garner the courage she would need to escape her old barren island home at Harcourt, Brace. Although she had fulfilled an unwritten promise to remain faithful to Brace until his death or retirement, she had nonetheless begun realize the importance of mapping her own autonomous and creative future, like Circe, who lived “on her own island in a dappled forest glade.”

In writing “A Defense of Circe,” Porter imagined feminine strength and superiority as a way of mentally preparing for the resilience it would require for her to move beyond the security of her Harcourt, Brace family, a security that she had continued
to depend on, even after her relations with the firm had become strained and embittered. Her publishing family, however, would rapidly lose cohesion and disintegrate with the death of Donald Brace from lung cancer in 1955 and the loss of an editor with whom she had confided in and clashed with, Catherine Carver, who withdrew from working with Porter. If we use the familial analogy, Porter was losing a sisterly alliance in Carver, and the father/husband holding the family together was already dead. With the main components of her Harcourt, Brace family gone and with a new group of men who did not know her carrying on the mantle, her familial ties of loyalty had, finally, broken.

Porter could not face getting to know a new group of employees who would never come close to matching Brace's constant attentions and gift for making her feel like a vital member of the house. While Brace, Porter, and many other employees over the years had been "tangled together," paralleling Miranda's family in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, "like badly cast fishing lines," they had nevertheless been intimate and they had behaved for many years like family, with all the combinations of "anger," "outrage," and laughter.124 Although Porter had set herself up to be profoundly disappointed with Donald Brace, he had nevertheless for many years been her endearing and faithful friend and confidant. He would not be replaced easily. Porter would need a stroke of good fortune to find another publisher who would cultivate her in the manner of a genteel publishing tradition that suited her psychological needs. She would not find it in the ambitious and hardworking young patriarch of the firm, William Jovanovich, who in 1954 sat poised to bring the firm into a new publishing era.

The affairs of the house had become increasingly tumultuous since the end of the war. Alfred Harcourt and Donald Brace had been engaging in bitter power struggles, and Bill Jovanovich would eventually become the beneficiary of the fierce quibbling.\(^{125}\) Alfred Harcourt died of cancer during the summer of 1953, after which a dispute ensued over who should head the house. A stalemate between the Harcourt and the Brace families was broken when both turned to Jovanovich, who at 34 aimed to create a management that was “both neutral and professional.” Jovanovich resembled Harcourt in his “strong and determined personality” and Brace by virtue of his “scholarly introspection.”\(^{126}\)

When Jovanovich assumed leadership of the company, his business ambitions took over immediately. During his first five years at the firm, Jovanovich concentrated his energies on cutting costs and putting the company’s financial house in order, so that by 1960 the publisher felt confident enough to begin bringing the company into a new era of mergers and acquisitions.\(^{127}\) Jovanovich was young enough to respond to a publishing world that was swiftly moving away from old-line publishing toward Wall Street; and as Michael Kreyling observes, “when it became abundantly clear to him . . . that corporate takeovers might erase the autonomy of the old house for which he worked, Jovanovich seized the initiative and took Harcourt, Brace into the conglomerate business as predator rather than as prey.”\(^{128}\) Publishing historian John Tebbel sums up the firm’s radical transformation under Jovanovich’s direction: “When he took over, the house was a

---


\(^{127}\) Tebbel, *Between Covers* 390.

\(^{128}\) Kreyling 197; Kreyling points out that Eudora Welty’s agent, Diarmuid Russell, was wary of the changes at Harcourt, Brace, especially as Welty had been publishing with the house. According to Kreyling, Russell sensed correctly that “business” was “at the controls” and that Welty’s “book would not be received in the old way” (Kreyling 198, 199).
privately held corporation with about $8 million in annual sales. By 1979, it was publicly owned, and after a rough period in 1978 when it momentarily faltered, earnings reached a record of $23.8 million.”

Jovanovich was not sentimental about leaving behind the old publishing world of his predecessors as he transformed the company into a publishing powerhouse. In an essay entitled “On Moving,” he observed that the firm had been founded during a time when “a tremendous burst of creative energy had enlivened American writing and publishing.” Tebbel points out, however, that Jovanovich “did not want to romanticize the past, and hoped there would be no commemorative fiftieth anniversary book in 1969, because he regarded publishing as ‘a singularly current enterprise.’” Jovanovich wrote the essay, “On Moving” about the same time that he was finishing his meditation on publishing, *Now, Barabbas* (1964). In 1964, Jovanovich sent Porter a copy of *Now, Barabbas*; she read it and remarked to her agent, Cyrilly Abels, that she found the book very “witty” and “civilized” but also “very cold and distant about authors.” It is safe to assume that Porter had developed her opinion of Jovanovich as “cold and distant” toward authors during the mid 1950s when she was deciding if she should leave Harcourt, Brace.

Jovanovich was as unromantic about authors as he was about preserving the heart of the traditional publishing house, the trade book department. After a difficult fiscal year in 1978 when earnings dropped to $7.4 million from $18.2 million the previous year, Jovanovich made the unpopular decision to wield “a ruthless budget-cutting axe” directed

---

131 KAP to Cyrilly Abels, November 5, 1964, KAP Papers.
at the trade department, resulting in the departure of prominent editors. By 1980, Harcourt, Brace would hardly resemble the old firm wherein Porter had experienced the luxury of being embraced and supported by an extended, naturally imperfect, publishing family. Jovanovich's publishing empire had merged book publishing with "marine parks, a chain of seafood restaurants, television stations, trade journals, newsletters, a management consulting organization, an insurance firm, and a psychological testing and school supply company." A true businessman at heart, Jovanovich swiftly became "the unquestionable, powerful, directive force behind everything the house did."

Although Jovanovich would not begin to transform the firm radically until after Porter's departure, the writer would have seen early on that Jovanovich was more interested in the bottom line than he was in charming the writer back into the Harcourt, Brace fold. Jovanovich did not possess the rapidly disappearing old-world qualities to which Donald Brace had accustomed Porter, wherein authors were considered the most valuable asset of a house and were treated accordingly. Brace had courted Porter in the author-editor traditions proclaimed by Henry Holt and Walter Hines Page. During the first years of the twentieth century, Holt and Page were already alarmed about the new trend in publishing wherein authors were as a matter of routine treated as commercial

---

132 Tebbel, A History of Book Publishing, Vol. IV, 175. Editor Gerald Howard describes his disappointment with the way Harcourt, Brace changed once business concerns began to mean the demise of the trade department: "Trade—i.e., bookstore—publishing accounts for only three percent of that corporation's income and adult hardcover only a third of that. The rest is made by the large school and college textbook operations, professional publishing, and a large string of movie theaters. Apparently that department was losing some money . . . so they just shut it down. The kind of publishing Alfred Harcourt started his firm in 1919 to do, and which it did so brilliantly, bringing out the works of T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Sinclair Lewis, George Orwell, Mary McCarthy, E.M. Forster, Italo Calvino, Alice Walker, and Umberto Eco (to name a few)—kaput. I have to view this as a small, but real tragedy, a death in the cultural family. But then, I would" ("The Curse of the Editorial Class" in Henderson, The Art of Literary Publishing 273, 274). In an interview with an editor from Publisher's Weekly, Bill Jovanovich reasoned in 1972 that the trade department list should be cut because in his view "the pressure of overproduction of books is astonishing." See "On the Future of the Trade," Publisher's Weekly, (April 19, 1972): 66-78.

properties rather than as human beings requiring nurturing and substantial human investment. By the mid 1950s, Jovanovich's forward-thinking, ambitious, and practical approach to publishing had replaced these ideals and was swiftly becoming the norm.  

In the mid-1950s, Jovanovich and the new officers at the house would attempt to rehabilitate the firm's floundering alliance with Porter. Jovanovich apparently did visit Porter in an attempt to negotiate with her; he must have known that she was unhappy and threatening to leave the firm. There is no specific record of this meeting, only references to it in correspondence that Porter sent to Jovanovich. In his meeting with Porter, Jovanovich apparently offered Porter $400 a month for a year so that she would be able to settle down in one place and finish the novel. The publisher evidently departed from his meeting with Porter believing that she was pleased with his offer and willing to stay with the firm.

After her visit with Jovanovich, however, Porter must have met with Seymour Lawrence of Atlantic-Little, Brown. Lawrence charmed Porter immediately; he was also willing to offer the writer generous terms if she agreed to leave Harcourt, Brace to publish with Atlantic-Little, Brown. Porter must have recognized immediately upon meeting Seymour Lawrence that she had found an editor who would be willing to meet

---

134 Tebbel, Between Covers 392.
135 Jovanovich's more practical approach to the business of publishing and to working with authors did not preclude him from trying to maintain a civil relationship with Porter. Their relations improved years later when Jovanovich proposed that they publish the writer's short stories in an omnibus volume, an event that Porter considered a "great occasion." Porter wrote to Jovanovich that she had "much regretted our relations for some time, and I am pleased, very pleased indeed, that we are once more on an even keel, and I believe we can maintain it without uneasiness for the future" (KAP to Bill Jovanovich, October 28, 1964, KAP Papers); their relations ultimately became quite warm, and on one occasion Jovanovich thanked her for inquiring about his health, telling her that she not only had a good memory, but a good heart (Bill Jovanovich to KAP, November 11, 1966, KAP Papers).
136 J.H. McCallum to KAP, October 31, 1955, KAP Papers.
her personal and business needs. Jovanovich, on the other hand, must have seemed
hardheaded and practical by comparison. Porter thus informed Jovanovich that she

did try to reconcile myself after our interview here, but the truth is, I have been
entirely discouraged, once more, and have not been able to recover my spirits or
see any reason for hope in the future, at HBCO. So in spite of my unwilling
agreement, I took up again with the two publishing houses who agreed to my
terms, and closed with the one who agreed in every point. I am immensely
pleased and hopeful again, and have begun to work with an easier mind.\textsuperscript{137}

Porter was simply ready to put her Harcourt, Brace years behind her. The new officers
had only agreed to give her half of the dollar amount that she had requested, and there
were other publishers, like Atlantic-Little, Brown, willing to express their confidence in
her abilities with generous monetary offers.

Jovanovich and his associates, moreover, spoke openly in a language of business,
using the terms like assets, publishing properties, and stockholders. Porter recoiled from
being reduced so openly to the status of property. In a letter fragment in the Hornbake
Library archives, Porter summed up her reaction to her meeting with Jovanovich:

\textit{[T]he worst are the new people—new to me, that is, at Harcourt Brace. I have
said and kept my word after that brouhaha of years ago when I was persuaded
against my judgment and feelings to stay on with HBCO, that I would stay until
Brace went. . . . But since I began this, the two new ones, President and Vice-
President, have come to me and . . . they conveyed to me that a great many things
were going to be different but that I was a part of HBCO’s history and belonged
to that firm, and they would do anything I asked to help me start working again,
etc., etc. they spoke of having “inherited” me, as well as owed something to the
stockholders! So I asked not for what I really would like to have, of course, my
ideas are on the ample side, as you know, but for the minimum of what I need.
They at once offered me half. . . . I thought, Poor old Lambert Davis all over
again. So I told them with perfect truth that I had an offer three times as good as
that, whereat they were indignant, and spoke of the dirty ethics of some publishers
trying to get another publisher’s property away from them, and I said, “No I told
them I wanted to make a change first. . . .” This really outraged them, and then
they came out with their fangs and said, “They aren’t after anything but your
name! and my jailors said, “They can’t sell your books, you just aren’t that kind

\textsuperscript{137} KAP to Bill Jovanovich, November 20, 1955. KAP Papers.
of writer!” and I just said to THEM, “Well, if my name is the only thing I have to peddle, maybe I had better peddle it while it is still hot!” It was one of the strangest interviews I ever had, with anybody at all, for its strangely mixed motives on the other side . . . determined to keep me, therefore alternatively making the grossest flatteries and sentimental references to our long association, and on the other, belittling my chances of ever getting out of debt to them” [my emphasis].

The writer who had once so easily trusted her editors and publishers had become all too familiar with the unseemly aspects of business negotiations.

Before giving up all hope that she could work with the new officers at Harcourt, Brace, however, Porter had first tried to garner sympathy from the new president when she explained to Jovanovich about Brace’s “careless mismanagement” of her affairs over the years and of the “shock” and “disappointment” she had endured because “so little use [had been] made of the most obvious ways to make a little money here and there on various rights, etc., the fixed idea that I am not an author whose work could be made to sell a little profitably.” Porter failed to acknowledge that she had consented early on to the business plan that Brace had outlined for her and that she had also chosen to eschew the services of an agent. Instead, she blamed Brace as the “editor and manager, or unmanager” who had “non-conducted” her literary affairs with “such frustrating Laissez-faire for something like a quarter century.” Brace had become the repository for all of her regrets and frustrations. She began to call him “weak” and “devious”; he began to resemble the “selfish, careless, unloving” men who inhabited her fiction. The man she had once idealized was now no better than her father and had similarly failed her.

If Porter began to portray Brace as one of her more unsavory male characters, it might also be said of Porter that she had fallen into one of the more destructive behavior

---

138 Undated letter fragment, KAP Papers, cited by Givner 419.
patterns exhibited by her fictional heroine, Sophia Jane Rhea. In *The Old Order*, Sophia Jane is essentially a strong woman, "just humane, proud, and simple."1 Yet she has a weakness for the men in her family, although she hates them for their "selfish, careless, unloving" ways. In her wish not to alienate them, she tries to please them, even though they are irresponsible and untrustworthy. Her husband, for example, "threw away her dowry and her property in wild investments in strange territories." Although Sophia Jane believes that "she could have managed her affairs profitably," she also feels that "her natural activities lay elsewhere" and so turns them over to men, whose job it is "to make all the decisions and dispose of financial matters."1 In relinquishing control over her assets to male relatives who fritter away her resources, Sophia Jane positions herself to become bitter. Not surprisingly, she grows to "despise" the very men who "ruled" her.

In her professional life, Porter followed in Sophia Jane's footsteps. In entrusting her publishing affairs to Donald Brace, Porter succeeded in pleasing her publishers and in gaining their support and approval. Once she had delegated her business affairs to men who were hardly impartial, she allowed herself to be lulled into a false sense of security and went about pursuing her "natural activities" as a writer. Her actions were counterproductive. The time and emotional energy she exerted once she confronted the consequences of her actions are evident in the astonishing number of letters she wrote to her editors, fruitlessly attempting to correct problems that might have been handled easily by a knowledgeable agent.

139 KAP to Bill Jovanovich, October 6, 1955, KAP Papers.
140 KAP to Bill Jovanovich, August 11, 1964, KAP Papers.
Porter never sought to examine the truths behind her own motivations for complying with the wants and demands of her publishers, even when their demands threatened to subordinate and diminish her immense and natural talents as a creator of short fiction. Nor would she seek to understand the truth about why she had so completely and trustingly relinquished control over her publishing properties. True to her vocation, she instead created another fiction, one of a “weak” and “devious” editor and publisher who had betrayed her. Like Sophia Jane, Porter had come to “despise” the very men she had chosen to “rule” over her most sacred, creative terrain.
Chapter Three

"The Creative Miracle, The Creative Horror":

Katherine Anne Porter, Seymour Lawrence and

“That Whole Extraordinary Episode of Ship of Fools”

With the publication of Katherine Anne Porter’s Ship of Fools on April Fool’s day in 1962, the author’s friends witnessed a day many of them thought would never arrive. Porter had been talking about her novel for so many decades, and friends had witnessed her struggle to write the novel for so long, that when it was finally published it did indeed seem like a miraculous event. Porter’s close literary friend Glenway Wescott had been in communication with Porter’s editor Seymour Lawrence during the final years when the novel was being completed. Wescott expressed his concern and his skepticism about whether she would ever finish the novel. Clearly, though, he was a Porter supporter who genuinely hoped to see his friend’s ship finally reach port, and he hoped that upon reaching port, the author would finally be “safe” from the exhausting and stressful life she had been living. Wescott had never known his friend to have the money or the

---

1 Glenway Wescott was an author of novels, short stories, poetry, and essays. He met Porter in the 1930s in Paris and the two became close friends and corresponded for years afterward. Among Wescott’s best-selling books were The Pilgrim Hawk and The Grandmothers. He also wrote Apartment in Athens.

2 Before the novel had been completed, Wescott wrote to Lawrence that if “she were never to succeed in finishing Ship of Fools, I could explain it absolutely in great detail. On the other hand, when she gets it done, it is going to seem a miracle to me . . . The form of the novel has been a Moloch to my generation of writers, but Katherine Anne’s trouble with this novel been more of a circumstantial thing.” He saw all of her activities of teaching, speaking, and reading as “bloodletting” and as obstacles to her finishing the
security that she needed. She would need, he believed, a “creative miracle” to finish. Seymour Lawrence would turn out to be the catalyst for that miracle. When Wescott wrote to thank the editor upon the novel’s completion, he expressed his admiration and relief this way: “I have never known an editor or a publisher to play so operative, decisive, and humanly helpful part in the creative miracle, the creative horror. We thank you.” No words could express the ambivalent nature of this literary enterprise better than Porter’s friend and supporter, Glenway Wescott. It had indeed been an artistic journey, both miraculous and full of personal and creative horror.

The “horror” associated with the writer’s struggle to produce a novel for Harcourt, Brace had begun during her first few years with the firm in the early 1930s and had culminated during the last five years of her tenure at the house between 1950 and 1955. Between 1950 and 1955, the writer’s professionalism dissolved almost completely as she strove to cope with her feelings of self-recrimination, lack of faith in her abilities, and unhappiness about her state of “peonage.” A sense of powerlessness and defeat pervaded her thinking with regard to her writing and her professional affairs, except for brief episodes of elation as when she wrote “A Defense of Circe.” Given her embittered feelings toward her publishers, we must wonder why she chose to shift her burdens to yet another publishing house, Atlantic-Little, Brown, especially when her new publishers were as intent as Harcourt, Brace had been upon publishing her first novel.
Toward the end of her life, when Porter was finally free from any publishing ties, she relished living without the pressures and complications associated with such alliances. In a letter written in 1975 to editor Ann Close of Alfred A. Knopf, wherein she explains why she will make no contracts with publishers, she explains that she is in the happy situation of being completely free with no publisher no contract, no advance, which I have taken a good deal of trouble to accomplish. I have the mysterious but consoling idea of returning somewhat to my original situation when I first was writing free as air, and almost living on it, but I wrote without fear or favor, responsible only to myself, totally without interest in anybody else’s opinion of my work, and it was the ideal situation for me... I remember it rather longingly sometimes as the happiest period of my life.4

Over time, Porter’s feelings about the negative ways publishers could interfere with an artist’s life intensified. Ten years after she wrote to Ann Close at Alfred A. Knopf, the eighty-five-year old writer had this to say: “My dear fellow artists, I suggest that you go ahead and do your work and do it as you please and refuse to allow any force, any influence (that is to say, any editor or publisher) to tamper with your life or to debase your work. You are practicing an art and they are running a business and just keep that in mind.”5 It is of grave importance, she cautions, that writers understand the difference between the luxury of “writing free as air” and the artificial and suffocating demands of publishers and the marketplace. To emphasize her point, Porter positions publishers as predators whose greed will impel them to “debase” a writer’s work in a crass pursuit of profits.

Although the writer’s authoritative tone might lead us to believe that she followed her own advice, in fact she caused herself a great deal of misery by failing to

---

4 KAP to Ann Close, July 15, 1975, KAP Papers.
5 This quotation is found in Tillie Olsen’s Silences. It is quoted out of context. See Olsen 176.
heed her own warnings. We know that she eventually regretted having looked to Donald Brace as her life-long protector and advocate. She said many times that she had been foolish when she had allowed Brace to convince her to remain loyal to him and to the house after she had tried to break with the firm in 1940. Yet even after her experiences at Harcourt, Brace, she did not separate deep personal friendships from the business of managing her career. Instead, she developed an even stronger bond with her next editor, Seymour Lawrence.

We also know that, although she advised Eudora Welty not to succumb against her will to the pressure to write a novel, Porter did exactly that in her own life. Writing to friend and fellow writer, James F. Powers, Porter described the novel as “an instrument of torture.” Her choice of words is telling considering that she had just recently settled into her retreat in Southbury, Connecticut, where she would begin the six-year long odyssey to finish her novel. “My stand is childishly simple,” she explained to Powers, “we should all write what we can or like to write, in any form we are able to write.” As with Welty, she was hoping that Powers would not follow in her footsteps, unless of course he genuinely wanted to try his hand at writing novels. While her advice seems lighthearted, her words are informed by a very real sense of dread, panic, even fear. Although her tone is relaxed when counseling and encouraging a less experienced and less well-known fellow writer, her frequent letters to Seymour Lawrence illustrate that she felt these very emotions frequently and intensely.

---

6 In another letter to Lawrence, Porter wrote that if anything could have “ruined” her life “this devilish book I never meant to write would have done it!” (KAP to Seymour Lawrence, August 25, 1958, KAP Papers).
7 KAP to James F. Powers, July 20, 1956, in Bayley 511.
Porter had personal and practical reasons for failing to maintain a healthy professional distance from her publishers and for failing to resist their demands. She needed to find new publishers in 1955 when she told Bill Jovanovich that her long association with Harcourt, Brace was over. Her ambition to pay off her debt to Harcourt, Brace was in reality a daunting and exhausting prospect, so she sought out publishers who would buy out her debt. She also could not give up her dream of finding a place to live and write without having to work, so once again she sought publishers willing to pay her an advance sum on a monthly basis, so that she could remain in one place and write. Finally, she needed a one-on-one alliance with an editor because, whether or not she was conscious of her need, the author-editor bond was clearly the kind of professional and personal relationship that she could not resist.

When Seymour Lawrence first visited Porter in Southbury, Connecticut, where she had rented a house and intended to settle down to finish her novel, she knew almost immediately that Lawrence would be the kind of editor that she desired.² Once again, Porter would find a man who would make up for her father’s rejection and lack of support and who would alleviate her own deepest insecurities about herself as an artist. She had found someone who would offer his “blessings,” his “utmost faith” in her abilities, and his “constant and undiminished admiration.”⁹ So although there was a side of Porter that

---

² Seymour Lawrence recalls his first visit with Porter in a memorandum to Edward Weeks. His original intention for visiting Porter was to discuss with her the possibility of publishing a short story or new essay in the *Atlantic Monthly*. She instead offered a long section of her novel. Porter then “casually asked whether we could recommend a good publisher for her novel since Donald Brace had died and she preferred to have a new association. I said that I was primarily responsible for our books and that the Atlantic Monthly Press in association with Little, Brown & Company would be happy to publish her novel and her future works. Her reply was: ‘Why, Mr. Lawrence, I believe that’s a proposition and if it is I accept it’” (memorandum from Seymour Lawrence to Edward Weeks, September 18, 1962, KAP Papers).

⁹ Seymour Lawrence to KAP, August 16, 1961, KAP Papers.
rejected her editors and despised the “dreadful machinery” of publishing, there was also another Porter who could not resist the kind of attentions she had received from Donald Brace and would now receive from Seymour Lawrence, whose youthful enthusiasm, devotion, and commitment would satisfy her deepest personal needs.\(^{10}\)

In 1955, Edward Weeks, legendary editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, and Arthur Thornhill, Sr., Chairman of Little, Brown, appointed Seymour Lawrence to the position of director of the *Atlantic Monthly Press*. At age 28, Lawrence was the youngest director of the press in its history.\(^{11}\) The *Atlantic Monthly Press*, historically a small publisher of first-rate titles, made arrangements in 1925 to publish in conjunction with an established publishing house, Little Brown. Little, Brown had the resources to produce and promote adequately the books chosen and edited by the *Atlantic Monthly* staff.\(^{12}\) Little, Brown would provide the press with the resources required to publish, promote, and invest financially in their chosen authors.

In his position as editor connected to but separate from operations at Little, Brown, Seymour Lawrence was positioned favorably to act both as editor and advocate on behalf of Porter. In his personal communications with the writer, Lawrence played the roles of “collaborator, psychiatrist, and confessor,” whereas when communicating to the officers at Little, Brown he shifted to playing the roles of “politician, diplomat,

\(^{10}\) KAP to Cyrilly Abels, November 4, 1964, KAP Papers
\(^{12}\) Madison *Book Publishing in America* 248-49; publishing historian John Tebbel writes that “the union between Little, Brown and the *Atlantic Monthly* Co. was a natural one. They shared common interests as well as geographical proximity, and together made one of those publisher-magazine combinations, each feeding the other, that had worked well for so many New York publishers. *Atlantic Monthly Press* books were to be prepared at the *Atlantic Monthly* offices and manufactured and distributed by Little, Brown in the usual way” (Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing*, Vol. III).
mediator." Lawrence not only helped Porter as a personal friend and supporter, but he also protected her from the humiliation of having to ask for advances from the officers at Little, Brown, and he shielded her from their urgent inquiries regarding her progress on the novel. Lawrence, in other words, placated the restless publishers at Little, Brown, buying his client more time to finish her novel. He was also more independent in his role as editor than Donald Brace had been since Brace was not only Porter's editor but at various times head of his firm as well. At Harcourt, Brace, Porter had to appeal directly to Brace when she needed more time or more money. Brace's dual role as publisher and personal advocate created an uneasy blending of business and friendship. Friction between author and editor inevitably resulted. Lawrence, on the other hand, was able to act in the role of mediator between author and publisher. In that role, he was able to shield Porter from the impatient demands of publishers, operating in neutral territory from his office at the Atlantic Monthly Press. He thus performed effectively as a "double agent," one who represented both his author and the interests of the financial officers at Little, Brown.  

Lawrence's position as director of the Atlantic Monthly allowed him to develop into the kind of editor who, in the tradition of Maxwell Perkins, dedicated himself wholeheartedly to his writers. As an editor at a small press affiliated with a conservative publishing house, he was largely immune to the vast changes in a publishing world.
wherein houses were being "restructured in the corporate image." In the larger houses, including Harcourt, Brace under the direction of Bill Jovanovich, the intimacy between authors and editors was gradually eroding, and agents were increasingly taking over some of the responsibilities toward authors that in the past had been the province of the editor. Little, Brown was under the direction of publishers who were unwilling to confront the changes in the publishing world as Bill Jovanovich had, aggressively and proactively. Under the direction of Arthur Thornhill, Jr., who was made executive vice-president in 1958 and was elected president in 1962, Little, Brown maintained its "traditional low profile." The house determinedly resisted the temptations of acquisition seekers until 1967, when the firm accepted a very favorable offer from Time, Inc. Even after the merger, however, the house remained stable. Thornhill continued at the helm, employees were retained, and "Little, Brown went on in its customary tranquil way."16

Within the comfortable and stable publishing atmosphere provided by Atlantic-Little, Brown, Seymour Lawrence would develop the editorial qualities for which he would become renowned. His experiences working with Porter would teach him that authors and their interests should always come first and that mutual trust between author and editor was paramount. A glance at Lawrence's long editorial career in the years following his departure from Atlantic-Little, Brown will illustrate the publisher's life-long dedication to acquiring fine authors and then devoting himself completely to them.

After Lawrence broke with Atlantic-Little, Brown in 1964, he joined Alfred A. Knopf as their editorial vice-president and as a member of the executive committee.

---

15 Madison, Between the Covers 352.
After six months, Lawrence left Knopf, in part because the position did not allow him to work closely enough with individual authors. From 1965 until 1982, Lawrence started his own publishing company, Seymour Lawrence, Inc. He positioned himself as an independent editor who would recruit and work with his own authors. For the practical purposes of "production, promotion, warehousing, and distribution," he affiliated his company with "the New York paperback firm of Dell and its hardcover arm, Delacorte." He published his books under the imprint of Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, and his relation to Dell/Delacorte Press was similar to the relationship that the Atlantic Monthly Press had with Little, Brown.

Later on in his career, Lawrence developed similar affiliations first with Dutton and then with Houghton Mifflin, always maintaining his distinguishing characteristic of being an independent "entrepreneur or impresario" dedicated to acquiring new authors and then devoting himself to their development. His willingness to finance his own operations and to use "parent companies" to perform the practical functions of publishing enabled Lawrence to maintain his independence from large houses and to avoid being a "salaried employee."

All of Lawrence's writers, including Tillie Olsen, Kurt Vonnegut, Jayne Ann Phillips, and Frank Conroy, recognized their publisher for his extraordinary qualities as an editor and publisher. At his memorial service in January of 1994 held at the Harvard Club in New York City, one woman in publishing noticed that all of Lawrence's writers

---

17 Lawrence stated that he admired Alfred and Blanche Knopf but that he stayed at the house for only six months because he wanted to work individually with authors and so decided to return to Boston where he would establish his own company (Carter, "Seymour Lawrence," 20).
were in attendance, and she inquired about what made him so special. In the opinion of
Frank Conroy, the explanation was simple. In Conroy’s view, Lawrence’s brand of
loyalty was special. Other persons in the publishing world could not match Sam’s
capacity for loyalty, he said. “Not by a long shot.” Frank Conroy sums up Lawrence’s
qualities in an appreciation of his publisher entitled “Sam’s Scribes: Publishing Great
Sam Lawrence and a Legacy of Love”:

Seymour Lawrence, or Sam, as he was known to his friends, was a great publisher
who confessed to me many times that the late Alfred Knopf was a hero of his. I
very much regret, now that Sam is gone, that I never responded with my opinion.
Alfred was a prickly, self-important company man, while Sam was a passionate,
loyal champion of his writers, much adored by all of us. His main concern was
good books and the care and nurturing of those who create them. A superb deal-
maker and specialist in foreign rights, he was, from a business point of view,
everything a writer could ask for, but it was almost his spooky knowledge of the
various psychologies of the artists he worked with that made him special. He
knew how, when, and where to provide moral and financial support. He also
knew when to stay out of things, when to keep quiet.20

While working with Porter, Lawrence would develop his “spooky,” almost uncanny
ability to understand intuitively when and how to help his writers.

Lawrence’s correspondence with Porter makes clear that the editor was a natural
when it came to knowing how to handle deftly even the most complicated and tortured of
artistic personalities. He quickly gained insights into the writer’s personality; he learned
when to call, when to visit, when to write, when to send flowers and champagne signed
“with an infinite of love,” and when to let Porter escape her responsibilities, no matter

---

20 Frank Conroy, “Sam’s Scribes: Publishing Great Sam Lawrence and a Legacy of Love,” in *Vanity Fair*.
(October, 1994): 184.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
how aggravating and irresponsible her choices seemed. He also learned just how far he could push her when the pressure on him from Little, Brown became acute. Perhaps most importantly, he learned how to hold himself back when he was on the brink of explosive frustration.

Lawrence, in short, evolved into a seasoned and expert editor while working closely with one of the most challenging writers in the business. He had convinced the publishers at Little, Brown that Porter was worthy of substantial investment, and he had believed the writer when she told him that she would deliver the novel within a year. He would find out almost immediately that few authors could match Porter when it came to the difficulties she had writing a novel and managing her depression, finances, health, and what Lawrence described as her sociability and her difficulties handling all of the demands on her time. Lawrence once expressed his concern regarding the writer’s appalling lack of privacy and tendency to be invaded by friends during crucial stages of her writing. He advised her that she “ought to have in prominent red letters at the entrance to your driveway” a sign that would read “No Visitors or Friends Allowed. Beware of the Cat.”

Porter was extremely fortunate to have found an editor like Lawrence, who relished a challenge and would not be denied success. His determination to make her become the literary celebrity he knew that she was capable of becoming was exactly the

---

21 Lawrence sent roses often. There are many cards from florists wherein he expresses his love, almost as one would to a romantic partner. These cards are not dated. In a note thanking Lawrence, Porter says that “the beautiful red roses reached me on my birthday and . . . made me very happy. . . . Seymour do thank everybody for me, it was so very charming of them to think of me on that day. I’ve never got over the notion that it was a lovely thing to have been born!” (KAP to Seymour Lawrence, May 16, 1956).
22 Carter, “Seymour Lawrence” 22.
23 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, October 25, 1957, KAP Papers.
kind of support and faith in her talent that she was desperately seeking after her years of
disappointment and frustration with Harcourt, Brace, during which time her self-
confidence and faith in her own abilities had been badly shaken. Porter needed, in short,
Lawrence's brave vision for her and his willingness to put his own reputation on the line
to invest in her success.

Neither author nor editor could afford to fail in their mission to produce a novel,
but only one of them could actually do the work. Lawrence was positioned as the
creative midwife. It was his job to stand firmly by and do all that he could within human
limitations to ensure Porter's survival. The last six years during which Porter would
finish the novel under the supervision of her editor and friend would represent the
culmination of a journey that had begun decades earlier. The journey to complete her
novel would be one she could never imagine herself repeating; it would be an arduous
and painful episode, one that would drain her physically, mentally, and creatively. She
would have never reached port were it not for Lawrence, the captain who steadied her
course throughout six long years.

* * *

Porter approached her negotiations with Seymour Lawrence and Atlantic-Little,
Brown with caution. She had no intention of repeating the mistakes she had made over
the years with Harcourt, Brace when she failed to examine her contracts or to educate
herself about the long-term consequences of the papers she signed. By this time in her
career, Porter had specific demands of her publishers, and she intended to make sure that
they were willing to go out of their way to accommodate her. She wanted, for example,
to ensure that her new publishers would not pigeonhole her as Harcourt, Brace had done.
as incapable of making money or attracting a wide audience. She also made clear that she was unwilling to entrust her affairs blindly to others. Her defenses were up, in short, and she intended to be stubborn about her demands; she wanted her publishers to know that she did not take contractual agreements lightly.

Her demands included $2,500 in cash upon signing the contract and then $400 a month for twelve months beginning on the first month following the signing of the contracts. She then insisted upon a clause that stipulated that none of her books would be allowed to go out of print in her lifetime. This clause, she maintained, had been the “secret to my survival, for HBCO has never advertised me to any extent worth mentioning, or ever departed from their belief that I am a writer’s writer who cannot expect to have sales.” She went on to make clear that she would not tolerate compromise: “I think what I dread most is a dreary bargaining, and I beg of you, all concerned, to consider everything well and decide, and let me know, one way or another, so I may feel settled, and get down to steady work.”

Seymour Lawrence responded decisively, informing her that the Little, Brown board was “prepared to meet every single request set down by you in your letter, and we will proceed to do so as soon as you give your word. I am elated by this, and we are all proud to be your publishers.” Most of all, Lawrence wanted to express his and the firm’s “complete faith” in her. The enthusiasm and cooperation exhibited by Lawrence and his associates at Little, Brown was a testament to the writer’s reputation in the literary world, as her publishers were willing to invest in her despite her reputation among publishers

---

24 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, October 29, 1955, KAP Papers.
25 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, November 9, 1955, KAP Papers.
and friends as a procrastinator who often asked for advances. In addition to paying out the initial sum and stipend, moreover, they also paid Harcourt, Brace $6,137.50, the amount demanded for canceling her contracts. In all, Little, Brown advanced Porter $13,073.50.

During negotiations, Porter did not show any signs of anxiety about Seymour Lawrence and Atlantic-Little, Brown's substantial investment in her success, which they believed to be imminent. Rather, she expressed her great relief and renewed confidence now that she would finally be able to work again under less anxious conditions. Her firm stance and unwavering demands showed her publishers that she was serious. In their efforts to please her, they went against their better judgment and agreed to sign her without first seeing her manuscript. She had been reluctant to produce the manuscript, and instead of pressing her, they accepted her blithe explanation that the novel was "complete up to and through 239 page with perhaps a 100 or so less to come." Lawrence assured her that "our belief in you is such that we are ready to make contractual arrangements now, and not wait, if you prefer that. We want to do what you want." Porter, in short, had designed an impressive transition from one publishing house to another. She cleverly cultivated the interest of a new crop of publishers who were pleased and proud to have her "as an author under our imprint."

---

26 Edward Weeks expressed reservations in a note to Lawrence: "My hesitation over Katherine Anne Porter is not so much the matter of the price but the fact that she is taking years and years to bring her novel to the boiling point" (Edward Weeks to Seymour Lawrence, April 4, 1955, KAP Papers).
27 Arthur Thornhill, Jr. to KAP, December 9, 1955, KAP Papers.
28 Memo from NER (full name unknown) at Little, Brown to Seymour Lawrence, June 29, 1956, KAP Papers.
29 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, November 20, 1955, SL Papers.
30 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, November 9, 1955, KAP Papers.
In her negotiations with Atlantic-Little, Brown, Porter used the novel as a bargaining chip to escape her “jailors” at Harcourt, Brace and to obtain an arrangement that would alleviate her nagging and persistent money difficulties for at short while. But her promises were based upon deception. Seymour Lawrence might have gained insight into Porter’s tendency to mislead others about how much she had actually completed of the novel when she had refused to let him see the manuscript and assured him that the novel “really has a lot of shape and direction”: “I know where I’m going and what I mean,” she declared. “Don’t worry. It’s really a book.”

In reality, Porter had a great deal more to write than she led Lawrence to believe, and the novel would not be published until 1962. In January of 1956, however, Lawrence was expecting the full manuscript by spring so that the press could prepare the manuscript for fall publication and still have ample time for advanced publicity. He sent Porter a magnum of champagne that month with the hopes of celebrating with the author in April upon her completion of the manuscript. “If you want any assistance in sharing that magnum,” he wrote her, “and are waiting for a special and beautiful occasion, I should be more than willing to help — and let the occasion be the completion of your novel, which I hope will be as close to March 15th as possible.”

Atlantic-Little, Brown had made the investment in Porter because they trusted Lawrence enough to follow his counsel. Now he was impatient to see a return on that investment.

---

31 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, January 8, 1956, KAP Papers.
32 Janis Stout points out that in July of 1957 Porter was claiming that she had “20,000 words to go—the same number she had apparently given Welty in 1941” (Stout 207).
33 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, January 11, 1956, KAP Papers.
34 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, January 4, 1956, KAP Papers.
What Lawrence did not understand was that Porter’s masterful transition from one publishing house to another was only the beginning of a string of problems that would haunt her for the next six years and beyond. His client did experience a period of renewed hope and “fresh incentive” with the advent of finding a publishing house willing to comply with her demands.35 Once she had decided to sign with Atlantic-Little, Brown, however, she had in truth done nothing to relieve her burdens. Instead, she had simply transferred her debts and now her even greater sense of “peonage” to new publishers who had no idea about the difficulties she would endure in trying to wrestle with and complete the novel. She had, in short, rid herself of one publishing house and enjoyed a brief feeling of elation and relief, only to have to come to terms immediately with her even more pressing obligation to her new publishers.

In addition to living with the pressure of her new obligations and debt, she now had to face additional cause for worry and self-castigation. Once again, she had built her future on the pattern she had established at Harcourt, Brace of misleading publishers and deluding herself into thinking that she would be on to the next contract soon after she completed her current obligations. In January of 1956, she told Lawrence that she had been “so unsettled and agitated, I have not been able to work to an advantage at all.” Nevertheless, in the next sentence she went on to express the hope that she would publish a book a year for the next four years, including the novel, the Cotton Mather biography, a book of short stories, and a compilation of her occasional writings.36 She had

---

35 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, December 21, 1955, KAP Papers.
36 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, January 8, 1956, KAP Papers. Porter had not been working with Lawrence for long before she began to tell him that she was going to “begin the final copy in a few days.” At this
successfully made Lawrence and others believe that they were investing in an author who would soon bring them profits and prestige when in reality she was only embarking with them upon another odyssey of missed deadlines and delays requiring a remarkable capacity for patience and tolerance.

Soon after she had obligated herself to her new publishers, Porter must have been painfully aware that she had, in Janice Stout’s words, “mortgaged her artistry to the hilt and reduced herself to a kind of bondage of the imagination.” 37 It was not long before the writer suffered a “succession of seismic tremors.” 38 Although she loved many aspects of country life in Connecticut, her enforced isolation combined with the difficulties she continued to have tackling the novel made her feel like an exile from the world; she did not “feel free to leave it when I wished.” She associated her self-imposed isolation with images of incarceration, describing herself as “a prisoner who has served a very long sentence, part of the time in solitary confinement, who sees his imprisonment drawing to an end, and suddenly can hardly bear to stay in his cell another day!” 39

Porter’s letters to Lawrence gave him a mental autobiography of her troubled state of mind as he watched his client’s feelings of renewal and “fresh courage” descend into the darkness of the writer’s fertile and depressive imagination. The novel, she told him, had become

simply a curse and a burden hardly to be borne; and I lose annually thousands of dollars by it, not by doing the things I could sell to the magazines, all things I want to do; and the multiple worries and troubles that have come as a result of this

---

17 Stout 208.
18 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, November 20, 1955, KAP Papers.
37 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, August 28, 1956, KAP Papers.
38 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, March 20, 1956, KAP Papers.
had been—well, nearly too much for me! . . . why I have been so long in such a state of psychological suffering that it not only affects my way of thinking, but is actually an almost constant, diffused physical pain, in every nerve cell and muscle, as if my blood had briars in it.⁴⁰

In a letter to Glenway Wescott, Porter again described her depression almost as she might have to a psychologist, who she believed could have given her “perfectly plain, logical explanations” of her state of mind, none of which she would find credible. “I am horrified at the passing of time,” she writes,

at the responsibility of my promise to my new publishers, at the deadline I have already missed, and what remains of the novel to be written—the stacks of notes and the outline, I mean—look to me just like so much a waste of paper! . . . And I have had these cavings-in of the psyche before, and always, recovered; so I have had hopes this time too: and indeed, have not lost it altogether yet. This state is always accompanied by a physical lassitude, perpetual weariness, a wish to stay in bed and read and sleep—nothing more. I lose interest in food, and wish only to be unconscious, oblivious—yet if I said I wish to die, it would not be true. I wish to live—yet I have a strong tide against it apparently that runs very far out to sea. . . . I still have nervous choking and vomiting fits—not nausea at all, just pure contraction.⁴¹

Here we can see why Wescott was relieved and infinitely grateful to Lawrence for helping Porter through these difficult years. On occasion, Porter allowed him graphic and intimate glimpses into her serious battles with anxiety and depression.

Although Porter started off her alliance with her new publishers with an attitude of pure professionalism, it would not take her long to assess the gravity of her situation and to look to her editor for counsel and relief. Lawrence made the transition from business partner to intimate friend easy. He ingratiated himself, for instance, when he

⁴⁰ KAP to Seymour Lawrence, November 23, 1957, KAP Papers.
⁴¹ KAP to Glenway Wescott, July 7, 1956, in Bayley 508; Porter also informed Lawrence of her panic, telling him that she had been suffering from “fearful nervous and internal upsets, a very positive suffering which makes me feel that I ought to go to the hospital for a looking-over. . . . I tell you because I want somebody to know what is happening to me” (KAP to Seymour Lawrence, August 17, 1956, KAP Papers).
offered to send Porter a fountain pen in exchange for her bread recipe. She gleefully responded with a lengthy letter detailing her recipe and including her philosophy that baking bread was an "occupational therapy" that constituted "blessed relaxation and good pastime."42 Aside from small, friendly gestures, Lawrence strengthened their friendship and encouraged familial intimacy when he invited Porter into his family, asking her to be godmother to his first child, Macy.43 Clearly, Lawrence was very fond of Porter; he also understood the psychological benefits of making sure that their relationship transcended their mutual professional interests.

Even before business arrangements had been made official, Lawrence had already become an insightful student of Porter's frequently unsettled and disturbed commitment to her vocation, the parameters of which were now painfully circumscribed by virtue of her inability to work on any other significant projects besides the novel. In keeping with his determination to make their working relationship successful, he swiftly perceived her potential problems stemming from her creative paralysis in the face of deadlines and her ever-present debt and financial strains. He also quickly discerned her constant need to be assured of the value and importance of her project. He asserted repeatedly that the strains and stumbling blocks she encountered along the way were all in the natural course of things and should not distract her from the magnitude and importance of her final goal. His responses to her frequent outpourings of emotions, moreover, were gentle, soothing, and exactly the words she needed to hear. "Don't panic," he advised her on one occasion,
or feel any sense of fright, for I feel confident that these present difficulties will be resolved and that you will find yourself in the clear and writing freely soon. You are too experienced and professional an author not to overcome obstacles or sticky technical problems, and moreover, you know what you are doing. Don't let the time element bully you; let the book be your only concern and only that—not deadlines. And I think that to force something too much might impair the work.44

Lawrence's assurance that her "experience" and "professionalism" would sustain her constituted part of his ingenious strategy to keep Porter focused. He also sought to relieve pressure when he assured her that quality was always paramount and that deadlines were nothing other than a technicality in place to assure the financial department and others at Little, Brown that the process was moving along. On one occasion after he had called and calmed her over the phone, she responded in a letter by telling him that he was her "exorcist" due to his ability "cast out" her "devils."45 With constant assurances that she was incapable of making "aesthetic mistakes" and that he had "rock-bound faith" in her ability to finish the book, she could do no other than to keep working while becoming each day more dependent her editor's support, praise, and friendship.46

In consequence of the developing trust between editor and author, Porter became increasingly comfortable with letting down her guard and allowing Lawrence to assume control of the business aspects of her affairs so that she would ostensibly be free to think about nothing but her writing. After Porter had taken care of her last contract requirement, which was her insistence that none of her books ever be remaindered, she effectively gave up her efforts to control the business aspects of her relationship with

44 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, May 28, 1956, KAP Papers.
45 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, February 26, 1957, KAP Papers.
Atlantic-Little, Brown. Lawrence was apparently eager to relieve her of the burden of having to fret over issues regarding money, contracts, and the growing pressures generated from the business office at Little, Brown over her apparent disregard of deadlines and her occasional need for more advances.

After Porter’s initial hard-line approach to protecting her rights during contract negotiations, then, Lawrence assumed control over her professional affairs and became her advocate and spokesman. He also began to play the vital role of acting as buffer between Porter and the business office at Little, Brown. He called Porter’s initial contractual concerns “sensible and right,” but he quickly moved to distract her away from such details, telling her that she should no longer be disturbed by the “horde and minutiae” of business negotiations. Instead, she should “try to forget about them and think of the novel.”

The buffer role that Seymour Lawrence played created an ideal situation for the writer because she did not have to ask for money from her editor and publisher directly, as she had to do with Donald Brace. Instead, she was shielded from continual negotiations and contact with the business side of publishing, a circumstance that saved

---

46 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, March 5, 1957, KAP Papers; KAP to Seymour Lawrence, July 16, 1956, KAP Papers.
47 Porter felt as strongly about not wanting her books to be remaindered as she did about not wanting her books to go out of print in her lifetime. She believed that the key to her survival at Harcourt, Brace had been her agreement with them never to let her books go out of print. She was always painfully insulted if she ever saw her books marked down/remaindered due to overstock. Seymour Lawrence explained the dilemma to James Sherman at Little, Brown: “While Miss Porter understands the difference between overstock and remaining, she feels the results are the same: she will appear on the remainder shelves which she does not want. We wonder whether, under these particular circumstances, you would consider omitting the overstock clause entirely. We are well aware that this is not in the interest of good business, but the whole negotiation seems to hang on this point” (Seymour Lawrence to James Sherman, January 30, 1956, SL Papers).
48 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, June 29, 1956, KAP Papers; Seymour Lawrence to KAP, January 16, 1956, KAP Papers.
her a lot of time and energy. When she needed an advance, for example, as she did in May of 1957, Seymour Lawrence secured a thousand dollars for her. In addition to her living expenses, Porter repeatedly incurred high medical bills to treat her frequent bouts with pneumonia and other respiratory illnesses. In any case, she needed the money, and the businessmen at Little, Brown were beginning to grow restive with the delays and their concerns that she might be turning into “somewhat of a problem in regard to financial matters” were renewed. “As we all know,” Thornhill warned Lawrence, “she is notorious for requesting advance sums and other arrangements, at least this is the information that seems to be about the publishing world.”

In dealing with the financial officers at Little, Brown directly on her behalf, Lawrence was fulfilling one of Porter’s principal expectations of him: “Thank you for your goodness and real attention to what I send you,” she told him. “I need badly just the kind of help you give me, the only person who can do anything for me about the work itself. Otherwise as I said the only help I really need is the hirable kind that could act as a buffer in the small daily nuisances.” Porter made sure to thank Lawrence for his feedback on her manuscript, but she was also acknowledging obliquely that, as her editor, he was getting for her what she really needed to keep going, which was always more money. He delivered the money, moreover, without strings. His letter to her stated that the thousand dollars, far from having raised eyebrows, was rather “an expression in our

49 Arthur Thornhill to Seymour Lawrence, May 16, 1957, SL Papers.
50 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, June 13, 1957, SL Papers.
51 Porter wrote to Cyrilly Abels during a period of great financial stress that what she really needed from Lawrence was money: “So I told my dear Seymour Lawrence, please understand that my art is my own business, and I will go on writing in my own way as I have, but from the publishing side, I'm not interested in a thing in this world but money, and YOU'RE to get it for me” (KAP to Cyrilly Abels, June 24, 1958, KAP Papers).
complete confidence in the book and in you.”

In order to ensure that his client did not suffer unduly from an aftershock of guilt, he filtered information so that she would only hear the kind of reassuring information that would help to buoy her spirits enough so that she could continue to make progress on the novel.

Lawrence was less effective in his attempts to teach Porter the importance of drawing boundaries in her personal life. The writer yearned for solitude and isolation so that she could work for long stretches of time. No matter how much pressure she was under to reach a deadline, however, she could not resist helping a friend in distress.

Lawrence encouraged his client to turn away visitors who thought nothing of “camping out” in her house in search of understanding and therapy. He also reiterated the importance of ignoring her voluminous mail filled with requests. Porter struggled, usually in vain, to protect her privacy and to handle her correspondence so that both would not drain her completely.

The writer’s difficulties with drawing boundaries and keeping her eager friends at bay extended her creative silences and worsened her financial problems. In July of 1957, Porter was again at crisis point both emotionally and financially. In desperation, Lawrence secured her an anonymous donation by working through Ernest Brooks at Yale, after the Bollingen Foundation was unable to come through. This time Lawrence

---

52 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, May 17, 1957, KAP Papers.
53 Porter explained her dilemma to Lawrence: “Something unexpectedly Puritan in my temperament makes me at least refuse myself any pleasure or recreation; but it is almost impossible for me to refuse what consolation I can give to a suffering creature for whom I have affection. I am afraid by painful empathy—I know too well what suffering is like, I can hardly bear my own sometimes!” (KAP to Seymour Lawrence, November 24, 1957, SL Papers).
54 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, October 25, 1957, KAP Papers.
55 Seymour Lawrence to Mr. Ernest Brooks, Jr., July 23, 1957, SL Papers; Seymour Lawrence to Professor Normon Holmes Pearson, July 29, 1957, SL Papers; In January of 1958, Porter received another advance.
secured three thousand dollars on her behalf. Porter's response to receiving the life-
saving money was one of relief combined with terrible humiliation: "Truth is," she
explained to Lawrence,

it has been a mysteriously horrible time, I think I simply lost my self-confidence if
not even my self-respect—and they are no doubt pretty closely related, first
cousins at least, if not actually twins—at having managed my affairs so poorly,
getting myself into a situation where strangers learned of my private difficulties.
It is so ghastly I can't get over it, but just the same I am working again, and at the
end of the week I shall start sending the batch of blue paper again.56

Porter felt compromised, but she could never have drummed up a donation on her own,
and the grant achieved the desired end. She was writing again.

Seymour Lawrence also buffered her from having to confront the increasing
skepticism of the business office whose suspicions were undoubtedly aroused by her
occasional disregard of her primary obligation to Atlantic-Little, Brown. For example,
when Porter went ahead with a lecture tour that had been planned before she signed with
Little, Brown, she did not have to justify her decision to the businessmen at Little,
Brown.57 Her trip might have raised eyebrows since her monthly stipend had not run out,
but Lawrence handled these kinds of delicate situations for her. Lawrence turned a delay
into an opportunity and used the tour as a chance for her to advertise the novel.

Lawrence also absorbed the vitriol and politely rebuked the voices of pessimism
that surrounded Porter throughout her more than six-year-long journey toward completing
the novel under the umbrella of Atlantic-Little, Brown. Porter skeptics openly expressed

---

56 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, October 9, 1957, SL Papers.
57 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, January 10, 1958, KAP Papers.
their pessimism about her ability to complete the novel and implicitly questioned the wisdom of Lawrence’s investment in her. Lawrence, however, kept one particularly harsh Porter critic under control, in this instance her English publisher, Fred Warburg. Fred Warburg would send Lawrence confrontational letters expressing his outrage that Lawrence would tolerate Porter’s lengthy creative process. He continually expressed his opinion that she would never finish the novel, and he advised Lawrence to use “surgical methods” to threaten and humiliate her into speeding up the process. The following quotation was typical of the kind of defense Lawrence would mount on Porter’s behalf.

“I spent a considerable amount of time with her during the past few months going over the manuscript,” he informed Warburg, and

what is completed and what is still to come, and it far exceeds our expectations. It is unquestionably a major novel of our time, and so far as I am concerned, she can do no wrong. I think you would agree that it would have been foolhardy for any editor or publisher to set limits on War and Peace or Moby Dick. That is precisely the way I feel about Ship of Fools [Seymour Lawrence’s emphasis, written in pen for accent in a typed letter].

Porter’s growing reliance upon her editor was inevitable. He had positioned himself as her consummate advocate; he focused on her strengths and portrayed her in the most exalted light possible.

Finally, Lawrence not only defended Porter from her critics, but he buffered her from feeling the consequences of her own indiscretions. In November of 1958, she

---

57 Porter’s short-term agent, Jeff Hunter, had organized the tour. See letter from Jeff Hunter to Edward Weeks, December 22, 1955, KAP Papers.
58 Fred Warburg to Seymour Lawrence, June 4, 1958, SL Papers; Warburg also wrote Porter directly. He accused her of being too afraid to complete the novel and told her that she lacked the courage to complete it for fear that her usually adoring critics would not like it. Porter responded forcefully to his accusation. She was perfectly capable of responding to nasty letters with indignation but, by acting as a mediator, Lawrence saved her a lot of energy (Fred Warburg to KAP, June 5, 1957, SL Papers).
59 Seymour Lawrence to Fred Warburg, April 22, 1957, SL Papers.
announced to a group of friends at a party that she had finished the novel just to quiet their nagging inquiries about her progress. Much to her dismay, celebrations broke out and she felt compelled to ask Lawrence not to contradict her story:

I still think you are going to get it [the completed manuscript] in a few weeks. But I am so deathly tired I can’t see to hit the keys, really. Now then, don’t give me away, for I simply had to do something. I love my friends and their solicitude and interest and loving kindness touches me, but I must free myself of pressure from some direction, this thing has become such a curse I can hardly bear to hear about it anymore. So don’t give me way!60

Lawrence’s editorial responsibilities put him in the unique position of being the only person with whom Porter really wanted to speak honestly about all the troubles surrounding the completion of the novel. Lawrence was also the only person she wanted feedback from since he refrained from offering his own vision when reading her work. She explained to him that “friends can upset you with arguments—mine can upset me, I mean—and that is the main reason I never talk about what I’m doing or show anything I am writing except to the editor I am sending it to for reading.”61

Lawrence clearly understood the nature of Porter’s creative struggles better than anyone, but the quality that set Lawrence apart from her former editor, Donald Brace, had to do with his confidence in her and his optimism. Lawrence was capable of envisioning Porter as achieving far greater celebrity and distinction than she already enjoyed. Most notably, he distinguished himself from Brace owing to his belief in Porter’s potential to become an author who achieved both critical and popular success. He therefore combined his belief in her as one of the greatest literary talents of the century with a tireless dedication to advertising and promoting her work. Porter was grateful to
Lawrence and felt that she owed him a debt of gratitude for breaking her out of the debilitating cycle of being pigeonholed as a writer's writer. At Harcourt, Brace, her short fiction had been treated as delicacies meant to please a small but discerning audience. Donald Brace and Alfred Harcourt wanted her stories to pave the way for her emergence as a novelist. But even as a novelist, these men never envisioned Porter as a best-selling writer.

Porter resented both their attitude and their unwillingness to collect her stories into one affordable paperback edition so that she could earn more money from the stories and find more readers. In addition, she was furious that Bill Jovanovich held on to the company’s rights to her books, even after she had transferred her allegiance to Atlantic-Little, Brown. From a business standpoint, the officers at Harcourt, Brace were only protecting their business interests and trying to reap some benefit from their long association with Porter. But Porter was livid nevertheless, especially because her new publishers were eager to publish all her stories together in one paperback edition. Harcourt, Brace did not waver from their course; they were intent upon “keeping a clutch on those unprofitable little works.”

If Harcourt, Brace had sought to package her reputation as limited but as capable of commanding respect and prestige, Seymour Lawrence opened up her potential and set her on a course toward financial freedom and widespread recognition. Lawrence had a vision of her potential from the outset, and it appeared that his faith in her abilities and in

---

60 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, November 13, 1958, KAP Papers.
61 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, May 17, 1956, KAP Papers.
the magnitude of her success grew proportionally with the number of stumbling blocks and frustrating stagnation points he faced together with his client.

Lawrence began his efforts to prepare the public for the novel soon after Porter had signed on with Atlantic-Little, Brown by his decision to publish several chapters of the novel in the *Atlantic Monthly*. He used the cover of the magazine as a full-page advertisement for Porter and for *Ship of Fools*. In addition, he encouraged her to take advantage of the opportunity to publish part of the novel in *Ladies Home Journal*, as he was well aware that more exposure would serve the purpose of advertising the novel. Not only would serialization be “advantageous for us in sales,” he explained, but “they pay a great deal of money and we should not want to stand in the way of such earnings for you.” Lawrence always took an active interest in making sure his client was in a position to earn the most money possible from any given opportunity. In contrast to her former publishers, who in her view had let books languish without spending the time and resources to give her the international exposure that she thought she deserved, Lawrence assured her that “we intend to stick to a firm rule in securing for you the highest possible advance from every country and the most advantageous royalty arrangements.” Porter was greatly heartened by his promise to bring in as much money from the novel from as many sources as possible.

Porter had always received critical praise and enjoyed wonderful press among her critics, but this was the first time that her ambitions to make money from her writing were

---

63 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, May 8, 1956, SL Papers.
64 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, August 27, 1956, SL Papers; the advertisement for *Ship of Fools* in the "catalogue copy" written to promote the novel in 1956, described the book as “destined to take a
taken seriously and promoted. From the beginning, Lawrence made clear that “we have high hopes for the success of the novel and we plan to launch it with a major promotion and sales campaign, supported by a large advertising expenditure.” His words must have thrilled her. At the same time, his assurances would only come to fruition if she accomplished her work, and pressure of any kind induced anxiety and interfered with her productivity. Her panic would increase, moreover, once her twelve-month stipend ran out. Without the comfort of knowing how she would cover her bills each month, she was more than ever vulnerable to a wave of emotional ups and downs, a pattern that would continue throughout the rocky years she spent trying to complete the novel while making a living simultaneously. She struggled with one setback after another, despite Lawrence’s valiant and often successful attempts to secure outside sources of funding to carry her through the project.

During the summer of 1958, Porter reached a point of crisis. She was planning to leave the home that she had enjoyed for three years on Roxbury Road in Southbury, Connecticut, in order to teach at the University of Virginia in the fall and from there go on a lecture tour. She was tormented both by the fact that she did not have enough money to move and by the promises she made to finish the novel before she set off to Virginia. She requested a loan from Atlantic-Little, Brown to put herself up in the Outpost Inn in Ridgefield, Connecticut, for the month of August so that she might have some quiet time to finish the novel before her departure. She was well aware of “the money men being annoyed” at Little, Brown, and she was continually apologizing to

permanent place in the literature of our time,” as the writer’s “crowning achievement,” and as “a literary event of the first magnitude.”
Lawrence for confessing to him her problems. Lawrence sounded very much as Brace had sounded when he had repeatedly tried to convince Porter that, if she could just complete the novel, her financial woes would be alleviated. Seeing this painful pattern repeating itself again, Porter began to question the wisdom of her choice to transfer her allegiances and contractual obligations to Atlantic-Little, Brown.

She looked back on the past several years as a "nightmare," and she openly admitted that the constant tensions and worries about money had "broken my spirit." She explained her regrets and anxieties to Lawrence:

The battering of worry and uncertainty and change and anxiety about everything in the world of the past year, maybe of the past years, has really left me feeling as if a spring or a set of springs has permanently unsprung. I am tired enough to die, and am just starting on a long winter of hard work in a new place, and this haunts my sleep! Yet, I still think I may send you the last pages from here. . . . I am deeply frightened, for the first time in my life nearly benumbed—I have been frightened before, but it wasn't so final, somehow. . . (and the poor idiot Warburg is still wrong). It is not my gift nor my work nor my reputation nor anything connected with it that has caused this, but just simply the fact that they can all be ruined or damaged bitterly by my mismanagement of my life. I should never have signed any contracts, but have gone to teach and read for a living and write or not as I could. It is the perpetual being under the goad that has killed me. Killed, I mean, that part of my spirit that made life worth living. . . . But you do encourage me with your plans to make some money for us, for all of us, and to set me free. I am sure then I shall write again as I did once, for love and joy, which is the only way worth doing. Or not at all, which will be just as good for me at this point.

---

65 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, September 6, 1956, SL Papers.
66 Lawrence often sounded like Brace when he was trying to encourage her to not let herself get distracted by outside influences such as friends and family who wanted her time and attention: "Although I know that it is not always easy to cut oneself off from family and friends and outside interests, I do believe that it is important that you make every firm effort to be by yourself in the next two or three months. I am sure that given quiet and isolation, this time will pass quickly, and the novel will be finally completed. It is worth this self-discipline, every bit of it, and I hope you are now in the midst of Ship of Fools once again and that it is emerging as you want it to" (Seymour Lawrence to KAP, January 23, 1958, SL Papers).
67 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, July 30, 1958, SL Papers.
68 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, August 20, 1958, SL Papers.
The brief honeymoon Porter had experienced after the infusion of inspiration and sense of renewal she gained from leaving Harcourt, Brace had long since dissipated. Atlantic-Little, Brown now controlled the writer creatively in the same way that Harcourt, Brace had; the writer’s new publishers had invested in her, and they were eager for a return on that investment. As deeply committed as Lawrence was to his author, it was his designated task to extract the long-awaited manuscript from the clutches of a friend who looked to him to buoy her up her spirits and to help her to survive the tempestuous consequences of her own decisions. His job was becoming every day more nerve-racking, as editor and author alike were acutely aware of their accountability to the business office at Little, Brown.

Porter felt humiliated at having to turn again to the financial officers at Little, Brown after her bank turned her down for a loan, and she looked to Lawrence to steady her through the crisis. Her sense of panic was palpable when she told Lawrence that she was “so islanded and solitary I want somebody to know what is happening. . . . Somebody who won’t talk about it! . . . You said to me one time that I exaggerated things. No, I’m sorry I don’t. I never tell the worst at any rate, and I never tell anything until I am cornered and its [sic] often too late, as now.” Lawrence responded with steady praise and understanding. He offered compassion and simple common sense philosophy when he told her that he realized

the strain you’ve been under, working steadily to finish the book before you leave for Charlottesville, and I was disturbed to read your self-recriminations. . . . My grandmother used to tell me that nothing good in the world comes easily, and there’s great truth in that. The novel is magnificent and on a vast scale, and its

---

60 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, July 28, 1958, SL Papers.
problems by necessity are manifold and exhaustive. But you have it masterfully in hand.70

Lawrence assured her that the magnitude of her task was so great that her troubles were justified, and he convinced her that she possessed the professionalism and persistence required to see the project through. Lawrence, in short, did not give her the option of failing. Her task was too important to the world, he said, and “it seems certain to be one of the most important novels of our time, and perhaps the most beautifully written. The sections you read held my interest completely, and the few intervening gaps will, when written, be especially excellent. Your vanity needs no patting, but any time you want such, I’ll be only glad to perform.”71

One way that Lawrence continually performed was in his insistence that Porter was responsible not only to her publishers but to the literary world, to the history of literature, and to the waiting audience they had been cultivating through publicity. For it was Lawrence’s belief that she was creating a novel that would be widely recognized as one of the greatest novels of the era. None of his letters either to Porter or to friends or colleagues contradicted his seemingly unflappable faith that, in working with her on Ship of Fools, he was acting as midwife to “one of the most magnificent and enduring works of fiction of our time.”72 His refusal to indulge her dark moods and her occasional attempts to give up altogether made it next to impossible for her to abandon the one

---

70 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, August 22, 1958, KAP Papers.
71 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, April 2, 1957, KAP Papers.
72 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, January 16, 1961, SL Papers.
perpetual commitment that had become “an albatross around my neck—a dozen albatrosses around as many necks, alas!”73

The albatross that had been the controlling demon of Porter’s career for years now would only weigh heavier around her neck while she was on the lecture circuit, an activity she described as “[c]ruelty to a tiger. The S.P.C.A. would have got after them if I had just had four feet!” In her view, the universities where she spoke required a grueling pace and, despite the fair compensation, they were determined to extract from her “their pound of flesh, their pint of blood, all the hide and hair that goes with it, and the marrow of the bones!”74 In February of 1959, while at Washington and Lee University in Virginia, she received word of a Ford Foundation Grant that would enable her to settle down in a house in Georgetown for the remaining months of work.75 She resolved to get off the teaching and lecturing treadmill she was on so she could again become a “real hermit—no breaking into make tours to get pneumonia from exhaustion again. . . . I am going to be able to write again, and that is all I want in this world.”76 Regardless of the life-saving grants she received, each stage of writing or not writing it had become a grueling test.

In the next few years leading up to her finishing of the novel, the writer’s ideal publishing alliance with Seymour Lawrence would be tested as well since her editor was increasingly under pressure from the businessmen at Little, Brown. On the one hand,

73 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, July 11, 1958, SL Papers.
74 KAP to Cyrilly Abels, April 7, 1957, KAP Papers.
75 In a letter to her niece, Porter explained that she would be given “$13000 for the two years, about half of what I could make if I put my mind on it, at writing and reading engagements, but this will be as much or more, really, because I can settle in somewhere and control my expenses, which is more than I can do now!” (KAP to Ann Heintze, February 16, 1959, in Bayley 561).
76 KAP to Cyrilly Abels, February 12, 1959, KAP Papers.
Porter needed Lawrence more than ever because she was in fact far from completing the manuscript when she left for Charlottesville to teach in the fall of 1958. She badly needed the support and confidence Seymour Lawrence would continue to give her throughout the writing of *Ship of Fools*. Her inability to complete the manuscript amid her touring and even when she was well settled in another house in Georgetown, however, pushed Lawrence’s patience to the limit, creating a relationship between author and editor that was still immensely strong but nevertheless strained. At times, Lawrence was compelled to remind Porter of the pressure he was under and to give her stern advice. Voicing his concern about his precarious relations with the officers at Little, Brown was always risky, though, because Porter was more likely to feel anxiety and creative paralysis than she was to respond positively. Lawrence settled upon a pattern of alternately exerting pressure and shielding her from pressure.

In December of 1958, Lawrence expressed shock and compassion when he heard that Porter had embarked upon a “transcontinental” reading trip that ended in pneumonia and hospitalization. He urged her that “nothing is really worth this enormous expenditure of your energy and drain on your physical well-being.” Later that year, however, Lawrence was receiving renewed pressure from Little, Brown, and he tried to get her to complete the novel by March so it could be prepared for fall publication. When September arrived and there still was no manuscript, Porter received word from a very discouraged editor that his associates at Little, Brown were growing “restive” again. At crucial moments, wisely or not, Lawrence employed guilt as a tool to motivate her, painting a picture of himself as her “ever patient but somewhat disappointed publisher.
sitting humidly at his desk in Boston.” Lawrence pleaded that he had “hoped that the final episodes would be in by now and that we could shout the good news from the rooftops. When may we shout?”78 As the time for publication drew nearer, Lawrence again changed his tone and began to inspire her through the last stretch by assurances that his “confidence is stronger than ever, and I never doubted for one moment that we could both survive this and see the end. . . . It is an extraordinary work of fiction and we have seen nothing like it in our time. Much love from the gang in Boston, and our warmest greetings, and strength to your arm.”79

By January of 1961, however, there was restiveness once again at Little, Brown, as the completed manuscript had still not arrived. Lawrence wrote to inform Porter that he had been instructed to go to Washington and to work with her until the manuscript was completed. Porter’s response was to flee Washington. Her warm feelings toward her editors were premised upon geographical distance, intimate written correspondence, and the luxury of her being able to work on her own terms and with complete independence. She sent off a telegram apologizing for the “deep crisis” she had caused, but she nevertheless declared her intention of escaping the unbearable pressures of late that had completely “unnerved and brought to a stop” her work for six weeks by virtue of the constant “pressures and urgings and interruptions.”80 She escaped the East for a teaching stint in Riverside, California. There she isolated herself from publishers and friends, all

77 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, December 10, 1958, SL Papers.
78 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, November 30, 1960, SL Papers; Seymour Lawrence to KAP, September 1, 1959, SL Papers.
79 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, March 17, 1960, SL Papers.
80 Western Union Telegram from KAP to Seymour Lawrence, February 4, 1961, SL Papers.
of whom conspired, she believed, against allowing her the privacy, peace, and freedom from everyday contact she needed to write.\textsuperscript{81}

As soon as she was settled in Riverside, her letters read as if she had been released from prison; they were filled with lively descriptions of the beauty around her, including the freshness of the early morning air, so “delicious, so cool and opal-colored.” She felt herself waking from a “nightmare” and admitting that, by necessity, she had removed herself from harm’s way by leaving Georgetown, where she felt that “nobody can hear anything he does not wish to hear.”\textsuperscript{82} In Riverside, by contrast, the students were a refreshing and undemanding; the atmosphere there afforded her a delightful exile from the immediate pressures she faced on the east coast from inquiring friends and desperate publishers. The students happily listened to her “talk to them about what I know, and feel and think about writing and its relation and inseparability from our every day life,” and the writer was reminded of what she loved about literature and writing.\textsuperscript{83} In Riverside, she gathered the strength she would need for the last stretch of writing.

By May of 1961, Porter was back focusing on the novel at the Yankee Clipper Inn in Rockport, Massachusetts: “Nobody knows where I am except for Jesus and my editor,” she wrote to Abels. While in seclusion, she was able to enjoy the freedom from human contact she had always needed to write: “I have the happiness and the ease of mind and spirit I always have when there will be no telephone, no mail, no telegram, no

\textsuperscript{81} KAP to Seymour Lawrence, February 11, 1961, SL Papers.

\textsuperscript{82} KAP wrote to Cyrilly Abies that “the great project of my life from now on must be to find a way to live in my house without being chased in my mind with one or another species of blood drinkers, from mosquitoes to leeches to vampire bats” whom she claimed “made my life nearly impossible, who want something, they hardly know what; anything from one hour of one’s time to invitations to speak (free) at lunches or conferences by organizations for this and that” (KAP to Cyrilly Abels, May 30, 1961, KAP Papers).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
radio, no television, no visitors, with breakfast in my room and the whole wonderful but too short day in which to work."

On June 30, 1961, Seymour Lawrence received a telegram from a secretary announcing that the "Ship is in Port. Congratulations. KAP back in Washington." Instead of feeling jubilant over the completion of the novel, Porter still felt too hassled with household concerns and frazzled nerves to be happy, remarking that she was "still too tense to feel delight, only a dazed sort of relief and incredulity. But never mind, I'll come too—I am happy of course, but very soberly."

Porter still had a great deal to do in terms of preparing the manuscript for publication. She returned to the Clipper Inn again in August, where she expressed her displeasure with the final months: "The last six or seven weeks of anxiety and suspense and frustration and helplessness have about mangled me, and the horrible thing is that it was all so damned unnecessary, but its [sic] done and can't be undone." By October her work was almost completed, but she still seemed embittered rather than relieved. She informed her exultant editor: "Just one more deep breath and I'll be over the top. God help us all I doubt that anything is worth the pain and trouble and grief this bloody book has cost."

While Porter was slogging through the final stages of manuscript preparation, Lawrence was every bit as proud and jubilant as she was drained, exhausted, and plagued by regrets about how much she knew the novel had mentally and physically depleted her over the past many years. Lawrence's career, on the other hand, was launched, and his

---

83 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, February 11, 1961, SL Papers.
84 KAP to Cyrilly Abels, May 30, 1961, KAP Papers.
85 Telegram from Mary McGinnis to Seymour Lawrence, June 30, 1961, SL Papers.
judgment to put his faith in Porter was vindicated. He was in a position to declare to friends and colleagues that the saga of the last six years had been well worth his time and commitment:

The midwife gratefully accepts and appreciates all congratulations and particularly for your good wishes. This of course is a great moment for everyone and I must say I feel a sense of relief and depletion. Much of my pleasure and satisfaction was in working together with Katherine Anne these past six years and doing whatever possible to see the book through to completion. It was a marvelous challenge and worth every effort. When you have an author as fine as she is and a book of such major dimensions as *Ship of Fools*, then nothing should be spared.89

Lawrence also had the pleasure of informing writers like Malcolm Cowley that although the road toward completion had been filled with many “starts and stops,” “it has all worked out magnificently and the novel, in my view, is a major work of our time. Professionally, it was the most rewarding experience I have had as an editor and publisher, and perhaps shall ever have.”90

While Porter had just completed an odyssey that she vowed never to repeat, Lawrence had launched his career and catapulted himself and Atlantic-Little, Brown into the limelight of the publishing world. He was glowing and ready to capitalize on a year of publicity, advertising, and celebrating. Porter, on the other hand, was eager to find a quiet retreat, an escape from the attentions and disruptions that accompanied success. At a time in her life when she had never received more attention, publicity, and praise, she nevertheless described the period as “a very heavy and disappointing time.”91 She felt

87 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, August 18, 1961, SL Papers.
88 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, October 11, 1961, SL Papers.
89 Seymour Lawrence to Mr. G. Royce Smith, Jr., July 31, 1961, SL Papers.
91 KAP to Miss McGinnis, May 2, 1962, SL Papers.
“exhausted to the point where nothing touches me anymore” and she felt as if she were
“losing her human feelings.” Although she possessed the ability to charm audiences, as
when Lawrence told her that she “held Boston in the palm of her hand,” the reality was
that she viewed the public as “carnivorous,” and she dreaded the exposure and the
exhaustion of interviews and public appearances.

This was a time when she particularly needed and valued the friendship and
support of her editor. Her newly complicated existence required an all-purpose advisor,
someone who would help to manage her affairs, and a consultant on issues ranging from
speaking plans to buying a house. Lawrence filled these roles gladly. He and Porter
enjoyed one another as fellow survivors of “that whole extraordinary episode of Ship of
Fools” and as a tried and true author-editor duo. Lawrence played to the hilt his usual
role as her guide and advisor throughout the grueling months of publicity. For him, the
publication of the novel was a chance to renew his bonds with a client who had made his
career soar. He viewed the hard times philosophically as part of a grand and worthwhile
journey. The tensions that at times had threatened to drive a wedge between editor and
author had dissolved; the two were closer and more mutually dependent than ever.

Lawrence showered his seventy-two year old client with praise, again reaffirming
that he had never lost faith in the ultimate success of the novel, which he believed would
receive recognition “in the highest critical terms, and at the same time would be widely
read. Rarely does a notable work of fiction ‘have it both ways’ but I am utterly
convinced this will be so with Ship of Fools.” He also proclaimed that he had “always

92 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, April 16, 1962, SL Papers.
93 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, March 5, 1962, SL Papers.
believed in the intrinsic importance of this novel which will endure as long as works of fiction are read." For Lawrence, the publication of the novel was a defining moment in his career. Even Porter had to be pleased with the financial rewards and with the tremendous attention the novel commanded.

Even before the official publication date, the novel promised to bring in a lot of money and was selected by the Book of the Month Club judges prior to publication. In April of 1962, Lawrence informed Porter that the novel was number one on the *Sunday Times* and *Sunday Herald Tribune's* best-seller lists and that she was also "number one in the hearts of everyone on 8 Arlington Street." Soon afterward, the film rights to the novel were sold to Stanley Kramer for $400,000 and Porter's name was to be featured on the theater marquees. Despite all this success in April of 1962, in May an assistant was pleading with Porter: "Please don't wish you had never finished the book," Miss McGinnis wrote. "It means so much to so many people, including yourself, and I for one feel that I have had a rare privilege in reading it and meeting you."

While Porter reeled from her success and the attendant pressures that accompanied all the attention and interference in her life, the novel remained on the best-seller list, and her publishers continued to ensure that the novel would enjoy the maximum degree of success. Yet while Lawrence was still in high spirits and strategizing to nominate Porter for the Nobel Prize for literature, Porter was facing the

---

64 KAP to Peter Davidson, July 15, 1964, SL Papers.
65 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, August 29, 1961, SL Papers; Seymour Lawrence to KAP, September 14, 1961, SL Papers.
66 Seymour Lawrence to Mr. Roysce, January 4, 1962, SL Papers.
67 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, April 23, 1962, SL Papers.
68 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, April 24, 1962, SL Papers.
69 Mary McGinnis to KAP, May 1, 1962, SL Papers.
first stream of negative critical reviews. She had dreaded the arrival of a "certain subspecies" of critics who would arrive like a "boy with the shotgun loaded with rocksalt and carpet tacks" who showed up sometimes with a "slingshot" and sometimes with "half a brick" all too eager to do a "fast burn" on the book. Once again, Lawrence fulfilled his expected role of soothing her and making sure she did not worry over critics who, he assured her, were well known for their predictable fussing and not worthy of her anger.

Instead of dwelling on the negative reviews, he concentrated on keeping her focused on the positive accomplishments of "the good Ship" which continues to roll along at a steady and relentless clip of 5000 copies a week. . . . We have appropriated many more thousands of dollars for additional advertising in the major cities and in national magazines, and all of this ammunition and extra support will prove instrumental in keeping the book strong and vital as we go into the fall season and leading up to Christmas. Apparently, you have seen or heard about our full page ad in *Time* and this is the first time in our history—and possibly that of other trade publishers—that we have ever advertised in such a fashion. We shall also run a full page ad in the July 14th issue of the *New Yorker*, and that also is a rare event in book advertising.

For Lawrence, *Ship of Fools* was no longer an editorial project but an economic powerhouse whose success he wished to perpetuate for as long as possible. Aside from the personal problems Porter confronted in dealing with the constant publicity, requests for her time, and the exhaustion of having her private life constantly invaded, she could no longer complain as she had done with Harcourt, Brace that her publishers were not doing enough for her. On the contrary, Lawrence's promises had all come to fruition, and she appreciated all her editor had done for her.

---

100 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, July 2, 1962, SL Papers.
101 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, July 10, 1962, SL Papers.
At the same time, success for Porter and the fame that accompanied it was a much more ambiguous blessing than for Lawrence, whose career was young and blossoming. He was intoxicated with their lavish success, which in many ways belonged to him, for he was in the midst of earning a substantial reputation. Porter had finally delivered to her publishers the novel that they had always demanded, and because she was too drained to enjoy that success, "the good ship’s” triumph in many ways belonged to her editor, whose future now seemed limitless, and to her publishers, who were enjoying favorable publicity and enormous profits.

In view of the attention and commendations Lawrence would receive by virtue of his vital role in bringing Ship of Fools to the reading public, he was more than ever willing to expend energy advising Porter, which he began to do immediately. All the energy Lawrence had spent buffering Porter from various intrusions and garnering monetary resources on her behalf was now funneled into advising her in a number of areas, including her engagement schedule: “Cancel Minneapolis, cancel Virginia, but don’t cancel Providence and never cancel Harvard,” he instructed her.102 “Now for heaven’s sake,” he admonished her, “take care of yourself on this treadmill of lectures, receptions, and so forth. It’s not worth risking your health and well-being on all these commitments.”103

In addition to advising her on her schedule and cautioning her not to exhaust herself, Lawrence and the financial department were already warning Porter about the necessity of “husbanding her resources so that the book’s earnings will carry you through

102 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, January 15, 1962, SL Papers.
103 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, February 13, 1962, SL Papers.
for a period of years.” 104 Lawrence informed her, moreover, that Mr. Thornhill at Little,
Brown was eager to meet with her in order to advise her on financial matters. 105 He also
agreed that he would be willing to manage any financial affairs for which she required his
assistance, such as arranging for her sister to receive a monthly stipend: “Your sister has
been taken care of directly,” he informed her. “Please don’t worry about these details any
longer. I don’t mind getting involved in money matters if I can be of help and moreover
if it relieves you of worries.” 106 He also handled the monthly $500 payments on her
infamous emerald ring, which for her was almost the happiest thing to come out of her
success. It was a symbol that she had reached her goal of achieving literary fame and a
wide readership. But more than that, the ring was simply a jewel that she had always
wanted and that brought her a pure, simple feeling of pleasure every time she marveled at
it. 107 An object that seemed ostentatious to most was to her the ideal reward. Perhaps it
reminded her that completing a project that had proved to be such a mixed blessing did,
after all, come with some delightful and frivolous rewards. A bit of frivolity toward
spending would have been a welcome relief after the many years she had spent worrying
about finances. And, of course, the ring was a conversation piece: “See how publishers

104 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, January 31, 1962, SL Papers.
105 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, June 6, 1962, SL Papers.
106 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, December 18, 1962, SL Papers.
107 Porter referred to her emeralds as her “joy and delight, I never tire of them, they are beautiful every time
I see them, in whatever light” (KAP to Seymour Lawrence, March 21, 1964, KAP Papers); In a letter to her
friend, Barbara Wescott, Porter wrote that “these material pretties were not the main thing with me, if that
had been I believe I might have got them long ago: but they will be a kind of dessert, something nice—I
don’t care for desserts, let’s say brandy and coffee, at the end of what has been, after all, a long, strenuous
but exciting party!” (KAP to Barbara Wescott, May 3, 1962, Bayley 591, 592).
spend their time,” Lawrence remarked playfully, “ladies’ hats and emeralds. What a life.”

Lawrence also became involved in more complicated matters, including the several occasions when he worked on her behalf to try to buy her a house where she hoped to find serenity, stability, and a place to keep her papers and possessions. Lawrence’s scouting activities on Porter’s behalf were undoubtedly time-consuming, and there were numerous letters regarding negotiations and failed attempts to close real estate deals. Porter’s dreams to buy a place of her own were complicated by the fact that she did not have money for a down payment and was not receiving enough money to maintain the kind of property she wished to purchase.

In addition to becoming involved with the intricacies of potential real-estate deals, Lawrence was also concerned with establishing who would have control over her estate and who would be her editor and publishers for the long term. In a letter to Lawrence from Rome, where Porter had gone to escape the fray of publicity in the United States, the writer declared her allegiances and entrusted to Lawrence and Atlantic-Little, Brown rights to all of her future publications: “I should like you to be exclusively my publishers,” she said referring to Atlantic-Little, Brown, and “you, Seymour Lawrence, to be the editor and advisor for as long as you live or as long as you like, and most certainly, Glenway Wescott to be the Literary Executor and the man who goes over all those

---

108 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, April 18, 1962, SL Papers.
109 When KAP returned from Europe to the United States and found out that she did not have the funds to buy a house, she wished she had never returned (KAP to Seymour Lawrence, December 4, 1963, SL Papers).
bushels of letters, etc., and picks out those to be published as time goes on. And of course these are to be published by you.\textsuperscript{110}

Porter had come to trust Lawrence with many important aspects of her life, all of which were directly connected to her peace of mind and to her sense of security. Her willingness to trust Lawrence with advice about housing and financial matters, and more importantly her wish that he and Atlantic-Little, Brown be designated as her lifelong publishers, indicated the seriousness of her commitment to him as a friend, editor, and publisher. She once wrote to Cyrilly Abels from Rome that "[y]ou and Seymour, the three members of my family, Glenway, are really the only persons I CAN’T do without, we need to keep in touch all the time."\textsuperscript{111} Porter had worked with professionally with Cyrilly Abels for years, first while she was the managing editor at Mademoiselle from the mid 1940s until 1960 and then afterward when Abels became an independent literary agent in 1962. For Porter, those besides her family that she considered closest were the ones most involved in her work.

Lawrence and Abels were business associates, but they were also like family. In turning over her publishing future to Lawrence, she felt a sense of security and stability that at least her professional affairs were well ordered and supervised. The feeling that her affairs were entrusted to people she viewed as defenders and advocates directly influenced her optimism about her potential to continue publishing. She had a publisher and friend she could count on for the remaining years of her writing life. This was fundamental to her piece of mind, especially when, even during a "restorative" trip to

\textsuperscript{110} KAP to Seymour Lawrence, November 23, 1962, SL Papers.
\textsuperscript{111} KAP to Cyrilly Abels, January 26, 1963, KAP Papers.
Rome, her psyche was still exceedingly unsettled, fragile, and always searching for the elusive circumstances that would enable her to settle down and write.

As usual, nothing about Porter’s affairs was psychologically neat and without contradictions. Even as she had gladly entrusted her affairs to Lawrence, she was increasingly aware how little control she had over the money she had made and the extent to which her publishers were the real financial beneficiaries of her work. She soon became painfully aware how little of the profits she was entitled to, owing to an agreement she had signed on the advice of her publishers that stipulated a thirty thousand dollar ceiling on the yearly profits she could collect. If she were to seek more of the fortune accumulated from the novel, the government would demand ninety percent of it in taxes. Lawrence lamented with her, stating that he wished “it were possible for us to give you more than the $30,000 a year allotment. But as you know only too well, if we were to exceed the contract limitation of earnings, Uncle Sam would step in and whisk away the whole amount. It’s an abysmal law and outrageously unfair to writers, artists, and those who make their living by talent which cannot be measured on a salary basis.”

One wonders if her advisors at Little, Brown and Seymour Lawrence could not have done more to ensure that she might have received a more substantial yearly cut from the profits, especially since they were aware before the novel was published that it would generate enormous profits. They are to be credited for keeping the writer’s long-term welfare in mind when they ensured that she would have a steady and ample income for years to come. Nevertheless, the publishing house did benefit greatly from the $30,000 cap on her earnings because they were able to control and invest the substantial remaining
profits. Porter at times resented her seemingly meager monthly stipend in view of the sum total of her profits. Approximately six months after the novel was published, her royalty statement already showed that she had a $153,277.88 credit on her account after her advances had been repaid and before her most recent earnings (including the $400,000 sale of the film rights and advances from international publications) had been recorded.\footnote{Seymour Lawrence to KAP, August 24, 1962, SL Papers.}

In addition, the $30,000-a-year ceiling agreement precluded Porter from receiving any extra money in a lump sum, so that while her publishers continued to invest the money, she was never able to manage her finances shrewdly enough to buy a house. She lost one house in New Canaan, Connecticut, because she was swindled by an acquaintance, but her publishers also played an indirect role. She had planned to make a down payment on the house from a twenty-thousand-dollar advance Little, Brown, had promised her for an anthology she had contracted to edit. When they sent her only fifteen thousand dollars because they had not yet received the preface, she lost a sum of money and the house owing to an unscrupulous "casual friend":

Isn't it strange that if Little, Brown had sent me the $20,000 I asked for, instead of the $15,000 they granted, and IF they had not made even that contingent upon my finishing the preface, none of this beastliness would have happened. I would have the house, and be moving in. I can't quite see their point, though I'm sure they have one. But they could not lose, as they have my money in their own hands for their own use and profit, and that extra 5000 would have been a life saver to me. I would not have asked for it if I had not needed it urgently. However, that is water under the dam. Let it all go.\footnote{Seymour Lawrence to KAP, September 25, 1962, SL Papers.}

\footnote{KAP to Seymour Lawrence, February 5, 1964, SL Papers.}
Here we see a tone of bitterness reemerging in Porter's communications with her publishers. While her relations with Lawrence were sound, a note of suspicion had crept into her discussion of the officers at Little, Brown. Seymour Lawrence and others were sympathetic with her frustration over not being able to find a way to access more of the fortune that she had earned from the proceeds of *Ship of Fools*, but they were not bending over backwards to be generous to their best-selling author either.

Porter became increasingly suspicious of Little, Brown's business policies, which were not surprisingly designed with company profits in mind. She began to generalize about publishers and wrote to Lawrence about how "oppressive" she found it to be "wound in a kind of cocoon where I have no control of one line of my own work . . . and it is merely dreadful the way an agent or an editor or publisher tries at once to lay hands on everything you ever did and tie you up forever, until I get rather breathless." Porter may have felt overwhelmed by the necessity of signing yet another contract to edit an anthology for which she would receive a lump sum advance of $20,000. It does seem ironic and unfortunate that, given the success of her novel, she was still compelled to burden herself with more contractual obligations in order to access a mere fraction of the fortune generated from *Ship of Fools*. Sadly, the complications she now faced with regard to her private, public, and monetary affairs led her to feel a sense of helplessness and lack of control rather than relief and a renewed confidence that she could finally work without the pressures of monetary anxieties.

115 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, January 31, 1963, KAP Papers.
While writing to Lawrence from Rome in June of 1963, she sounded frazzled and exhausted by the confusion she still had regarding her business affairs. Her tone of frustration and resignation was reminiscent of her fatalistic attitude toward Harcourt, Brace: “But Seymour,” she repined,

what am I to do if my entire time and attention is taken up with all this muddle about rights? You know what your rights are, and I am just faintly beginning to discover that I too have, not many, not very important, but still a few just to reassure me that I haven’t become a kind of serf—a petted, indulged one, certainly, but a serf!—attached to a great rich publishing estate. Good heavens, it sounds sinister, doesn’t it? I think, too, the last straw has been the fact that if I claim my money, the revenoers [sic] will move in and take it all away. Of course I feel like a gambler who has hit the jackpot and then the proprietor [Guvment] [sic] came and took it all away except ten percent. . . . But I worked for this, even if I didn’t dream of having it. Well, I haven’t it, actually.116

One might imagine that having finally reached the climax of her career and found an ideal literary ally in Lawrence, she would be feeling more confident of her rights and in control of her affairs. Instead, her language was analogous to that of a dependent wife or daughter who, having discovered that she may have rights of her own, still feels unprepared, powerless, and unable to control her fate, financial or otherwise.

Once again, Porter was experiencing the trade-off of having invested her editor with control over so many aspects of her life. On the one hand, his active involvement in her affairs and his constant interest in her writing provided her with a sense of security and a sense of having the grounding and stability that she never achieved in her personal life. Her longing for a center, a sense that she had a home base, explained why she needed assurances that her publishers would always treat her as if she belonged. The publishing house was where she had her mail sifted and forwarded, where she could
communicate with sympathetic and admiring employees, and, most importantly, where one of her most valued human connections, her editor, resided and defended her interests. When she discovered that celebrity and success had not solved her problems and had not brought her the freedom, ease of mind, and sense of control that she had once hoped to enjoy, she was distressed, struck by her own mortality, and worried that valuable writing time was being lost. Such feelings of disappointment only fueled her growing conviction that her publishers had entirely too much control over her affairs, control that she had at one time relinquished to Lawrence and Atlantic-Little, Brown with pleasure and a sense of relief.

Now that her major task of completing the novel was finished, she had the time to scrutinize their policies. She not only began to realize that her publishers had managed and profited from the bulk of her earnings, but she began to complain that their policies did not always show a proper respect for her publishing history: "I was horrified to discover that all my books for Little, Brown-Atlantic were under one head, so that in case of a failure of one, it will be paid. I never had a book that didn’t pay for itself, if only modestly. I never failed to have enough sales and royalty to keep them going, except my Days Before, and they [Harcourt, Brace] dropped that."117 Porter’s comments are significant because they show that she interpreted Little Brown’s business policies personally. She did not see these policies as standard business practice but rather as a reflection of her publisher’s faith, or lack of faith, in her as a writer and a person. If she felt that any of their policies insulted her integrity as an established author, then she was

---

116 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, January 31, 1963, KAP Papers.
117 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, January 31, 1963, KAP Papers.
personally offended. If a contract implied that her books would not pay for themselves, then that policy was not seen as a business precaution but as an insult. The writer's bitter memories from the days when she had been "mismanaged" at Harcourt, Brace emerged while she was reexamining her contracts. These memories, still fresh and vivid, made her more suspicious and apt to criticize Little, Brown's policies.

Porter's opinions about her publishers at Little, Brown were also colored by the vulnerability and depression she felt after spending the next few years following the publication of her novel on a fruitless search for simplicity, tranquility, and productivity. Her intentions when she left for Rome after the fanfare and publicity surrounding the launching of the "the good Ship" were to seek "time and freedom of mind to work." She said she was "really ready to simplify my life and to get rid of things and stop trying to do more than I can. The thing now is to finish a few things I started, and the time is now and so, I am going: and when I get a good job finished, such as Cotton Mather, I'll be back."118 Porter's time in Europe soon became as hectic and distracting as in the United States. Her letters to Lawrence and others from Europe, in short, did not convey a portrait of a woman refreshed, invigorated, or able to enjoy the pleasures of success. "So here I stand," she explained to Lawrence, "on a little rock entirely surrounded by quicksand, yet I cannot help but hope and pray, but my whole life is so tied up in bowknots I have very little idea how to start untying them."119 She asserted that she was not living, but only existing "and getting from one day to the next."120 Despite her resentment toward her publishers and her disappointment with the dubious aspects of

118 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, August 14, 1962, SL Papers.
119 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, December 6, 1963, SL Papers.
success and celebrity, the writer nevertheless felt a sense of grounding and stability amidst "quicksand" through her firm connection with Seymour Lawrence and Atlantic-Little, Brown. The last thing she needed was any kind of disruption of her publishing relationships.

In March of 1964, Porter’s tenuous sense of security dissolved when Peter Davison at Little, Brown informed her that Seymour Lawrence had decided to “seek his fortunes elsewhere.” Davison wrote that Lawrence had parted with Little, Brown with “dignity, affection and respect” over differences of opinion regarding the identity of the press and the kinds of books Lawrence wished to publish.\(^{121}\) This news was a blow to Porter, who considered Lawrence among the “one-half of one percent of real friends” she had in the world.\(^{122}\) She would now have to either follow Lawrence wherever his career might take him or remain with Little, Brown without the man who represented her strongest connection with the house. She described the sensation of losing her stronghold as if she were being “gutted with a dull saw.”\(^{123}\) The sense of permanency she valued so deeply had been destroyed.

Porter’s first reaction to hearing of Lawrence’s departure was to defend him and to express her intense loyalty and gratitude toward him. She told Peter Davison at Little, Brown that she was “glad Seymour is making his way out into a wider field, for he is a

\(^{120}\) KAP to Seymour Lawrence, December 14, 1963, SL Papers.

\(^{121}\) Peter Davidson to KAP, March 20, 1964, SL Papers; Years later Lawrence clarified the reasons for his break with the Atlantic Monthly Press, where he had been director for nine years, in a letter to Glenway Wescott. He explained that he had been responsible to a “rich and conservative” board of directors. They thought that Lawrence chose to publish authors who were not socially acceptable and that would diminish the reputation of the press, so Lawrence resigned (Seymour Lawrence to Glenway Wescott, January 27, 1967, SL Papers).

\(^{122}\) KAP to Seymour Lawrence, March 21, 1964, SL Papers.

\(^{123}\) KAP to Peter Davidson, June 24, 1964, SL Papers.
real publisher and of international interests, and there is no reason why he should be limited in his ideas. So I wish him all the luck in the world. He is a wonderful friend and a matchless editor, and I do not know how I should have finished that novel except for his unwavering faith and ready help." Although Porter’s first impulse would be to defend her editor as he had defended her for so long, she was nevertheless devastated, especially as she had only recently designated Lawrence and Atlantic-Little, Brown as her publishers for life. Lawrence had cultivated and more than earned her life-long devotion.

Now it became a bitter irony that it would turn out to be Lawrence who would unwittingly drag Porter through a period of unwelcome indecision that would stir up her old bitter feelings toward publishers and precipitate a complete reevaluation of her attitude toward publishers and publishing. Porter was now faced with decisions that she was not prepared to make with detachment and self-interested common sense. These decisions involved whether or not she should follow Lawrence, wherever his fortunes may lead him. Rather than viewing his departure from Atlantic-Little, Brown as a natural progression, she was instead crushed; she was not ready for their alliance either to dissolve or evolve into a different phase. Although intellectually Porter was sympathetic with Lawrence’s ambition to broaden his horizons professionally, emotionally she resisted any shift in the continuity or intensity of their alliance, especially because she had been unable to achieve real happiness, stability, or productivity in the wake of the novel’s popular success. Her frustration due to her inability to finish writing projects was what bothered her the most, and Lawrence was the individual with whom she associated

124 KAP to Peter Davidson, April 4, 1964, KAP Papers.
the ability to triumph eventually over seemingly impossible circumstances. His departure created one more area of chaos in a life already marked by distraction and insecurity.

Not surprisingly, Porter would suffer a great deal more than Lawrence now that the seemingly rock solid foundations of their relationship were shifting. While Porter was thrown back on her heels, Lawrence was busily meeting the challenges of forging his way in a publishing world that, for better or for worse he told Porter, was increasingly “big business.” Lawrence was preparing to join a major publishing house, Alfred A. Knopf, as their editorial vice-president. His days of working intimately with Porter from the safe confines of his office at the *Atlantic Monthly* were over.

While working with an editor who had enjoyed and profited from the luxury of devoting himself almost exclusively to his writers, Porter developed expectations of an editor’s duties that were highly unrealistic, especially during the 1960s when traditional publishing houses were merging and becoming corporate entities, and relations between authors and editors were becoming increasingly distant. Direct contact with authors often became the province of agents, as many editors “lost touch with the world of the creative intellect.”125 Publishing historians Coser, Kadushin, and Powell have noted that, “as publishing houses are integrated into complex corporate structures, they change profoundly. Communication lines grow longer, and the organizational hierarchy grows deeper.” Publishers begin to spend more time “maintaining their organizations than working on manuscripts.”126

---

125 Coser, Kadushin, and Powell 32.
126 Coser, Kadushin, and Powell 31.
Now that Lawrence was leaving a conservative house committed to remaining small and independent, it would be difficult for him to find a new editorial position that would allow him the freedom and time required to cultivate and maintain strong author-editor bonds. Every day that Lawrence was unsettled was also an unsettled day for Porter; she was desperate to feel that her publishing affairs were in order. At the same time, she was hauntingly aware that her productive years were running out. Her sense that valuable time was slipping away would contribute significantly to her impatience and angst during the next few years.

Although Lawrence’s career was in transition, he still wanted to remain Porter’s devoted publisher. Porter was emotionally committed to staying with him as well, but her fears of becoming less important to him prompted her to make Lawrence openly reiterate his commitment to her. She did so by threatening not to follow him. She claimed that “reason” dictated that it would be best to stay with Little, Brown, where she would fulfill her contracts, allowing him to move on with his impressive career unfettered.

At the time Porter wrote to inform Lawrence of her decision, she was responding to a letter from him wherein he says that he felt out of touch with her. The last response he expected was a letter providing him with an elaborate and sentimental explication of her decision not to follow him to Knopf. “I have felt separated and shut off from you too,” she writes,

And after these long, portentous, exciting, and oh, how triumphant years we have spent in such confident friendship and such united interests, I miss you in the simplest, most natural human sort of way: and you know well that my first

---

127 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, June 12, 1964, KAP Papers.
impulse was to pull up stakes and go with you to your new career. I have been thinking about this very seriously, and have taken nobody’s advice, and have come to my own conclusion: and my dear, I shall stay with Little, Brown-Atlantic-Monthly Press: fulfill my contracts and agreements with them, take my luck, and hope for the best. What we had, what we made of our situation at the Atlantic Press was wonderful, and already I feel a change there: or maybe it is a change in my own feelings. But Davison came to see me, and brought word from all concerned there – all in authority – that I was entirely free to go if I wished, no one would put even a word in my way: yet they hoped I would not go, and that they would do everything possible, and as they said even the impossible, to make me feel at home there.

Porter fell for the psychological tactics used by the officers at Little, Brown to make her feel that she was completely free to leave. Their attitude contrasted sharply in her mind with the “dog-in-the-manger carryings-on of Jovanovich and all at HBCO,” and she said it was hard to believe they were in the same business. Davison and others at Little, Brown understood well that a covetous attitude toward Porter would only send her swiftly into the arms of Seymour Lawrence and another publishing house.

The more genuine explanation for why Porter said she would follow her “reason” was to discern the strength of Lawrence’s commitment to her. Her lack of intense and constant contact with Lawrence worried her, and she wanted to be assured that, if she stayed with him, he would make an effort to give her the kind of attention to which she had become accustomed. She must have known the response she would elicit when she revealed her deepest insecurities this way: “Seymour, you are going on to a huge career with thousands of new interests and demands on your time and attention: you shan’t need me and my manifold tribulations around your neck. Please be glad I am stopping where I am.” There was a great deal of truth in Porter’s words, but her decisions with regard to

---

128 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, June 21, 1964, KAP Papers.
129 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, June 21, 1964, KAP Papers.
Lawrence were not made rationally but rather in accordance with her deepest personal needs and emotions. She did understand that if she chose to follow Lawrence she would necessarily become secondary to all of his new responsibilities. But her feelings, which she admits were “pretty mixed,” sent her right into his open arms. The reverential language she had used to describe their “triumphant” years together was telling; she exalted the bond they shared, and she was willing to offer to him a depth of devotion and fidelity that her husbands and lovers would never know.

Lawrence probably knew that Porter would eventually follow him, but he was not willing to take any chances. He knew exactly how to bring Porter back into the fold. He pointed out to her that it was ironic that she chose to remain loyal to the skeptics at Little, Brown who did not have faith that she would ever finish the novel. “But you persevered and succeeded,” he reminded her, “and how everyone promptly jumped into that golden bandwagon!” Lawrence skillfully reminded Porter that it was the rare editor and publisher who would believe in her and defend her, as he had been willing to do all along. He hoped very much that she would reconsider her reasoning, and he let her know that his “huge career” was not very “relevant” to him. He cared about good authors and he told her “he depended upon her.”

Porter hardly needed convincing to change her mind. After a letter and a telephone conversation, she wrote gleefully to him: “Dear Seymour!” she wrote, “Hello, I’m back!” She felt “wonderfully easy” having finally made up her mind to stay with him, and she admitted that she had believed that she would stay with him all along “but

---

130 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, June 25, 1964, KAP Papers.
had to go through the motions of reasoning with myself before admitting it.”131 Just as Porter had needed reassurance in 1940 of Donald Brace’s commitment to her, she now sought out the same assurances from Lawrence and was thrilled to hear him admit openly how much she meant to him as he embarked upon a new stage in his career.

Porter was optimistic that the transition between Atlantic-Little, Brown and Knopf would be an easy and cordial one, and she dashed off a note to Peter Davison telling him that it was a “no go” and that she was sure that “everything would be settled in the friendly way you assured me it could be.”132 In further correspondence, she explained her reasoning to the officers at Little, Brown in more detail. She explained that without Lawrence she felt no sense of belonging or sense of having a “home” at Atlantic-Little, Brown. She told Mr. Thornhill that Lawrence’s departure had “made such a change in my situation and feelings” that it would be impossible for her to stay: “The change in tone, and atmosphere is simply too disturbing already, I do not feel any center there, or really and place for me. I am deeply sorry, but Mr. Davison assured me that, if I did wish to change and go to another publisher, I was free to do so.” She then appealed to what she assumed Mr. Thornhill would understand as the vital importance of the bond developed over time between author and editor:

And I wish to thank you cordially for the wonderful way you have shown interest in my work and have done such a tremendous campaign of presentation of Ship of Fools to the public. I do not forget this, and shall never; and the sole reason I have for wishing to end our arrangement is that I wish to have Mr. Lawrence as my editor for as long as he is able to go on with it. I am accustomed to his incredibly loyal friendly support, his belief in what he does for me, and I find it very difficult to take up again without him. I am sure this odd but very important

---

131 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, June 30, 1964, KAP Papers.
132 KAP to Peter Davison, June 30, 1964, KAP Papers.
and real relation between editor and writer is no news to you! I depend upon your understanding and generosity. 133

Here Porter conveys her expectation that her publishers will not only respect the integrity of her author-editor bond, but that they will consider that she had given them enough success with *Ship of Fools* to have earned their respect and leniency.

Instead, the disillusionment Porter had begun to express to Lawrence regarding Little, Brown and about publishers in general started to warrant merit in view of Mr. Thornhill’s response to her request for release. He explained that he had consulted with his associates and that he understood her “emotional” reaction to a problem she had done nothing to create. He then attempted to convey the seriousness of his predicament:

I have reviewed our contract, as it would be shortsighted and imprudent to do anything which would jeopardize the basic advantages of the agreement. In any case, the situation is complex, for the agreement does specifically provide for publication of three more books which unquestionably are volumes we’d like to have on our list. They would not only be prestigious but also profitable. I am sorry to be so mercenary, but the latter factor is significant in that as an officer of a corporation, my actions are accountable to the stockholders who probably would take a dim view of my releasing valuable assets. I simply point this out so that you will have complete understanding of the need for careful deliberation. 134

Here we see that Little, Brown’s business practices were no less “mercenary” than Harcourt, Brace’s. Indeed, Mr. Thornhill’s arguments echoed almost exactly the words that the president of Harcourt, Brace, Bill Jovanovich, had used when trying to dissuade Porter from joining a new firm. 135 Now that Porter was forced to negotiate directly with Little, Brown without Lawrence as a mediator, she could observe the competitive, harsh

133 KAP to Mr. Thornhill, June 29, 1964, SL Papers.
134 Mr. Thornhill to KAP, July 8, 1964, SL Papers.
135 When reminiscing about her last meeting with her publishers at Harcourt, Brace, she remembered that they spoke of “having ‘inherited’ me, as well as owed something to the stockholders!” Undated letter fragment, KAP Papers, cited by Givner 419.
side of transacting business from which Lawrence had shielded her so effectively. Lawrence had consistently positioned himself as the human voice within the world of publishing, the editor who was careful to put Porter’s most personal needs and concerns first.

Now that Lawrence wanted Porter to follow him to Knopf, he again positioned himself in opposition to the more ruthless and “mercenary” minded publishers at Little, Brown. He had lunched with Arthur Thornhill, Jr., and although their discussion was cordial, Thornhill spoke about Porter’s request for release in terms of his “corporate responsibility.” Lawrence explained Thornhill’s attitude to Porter, and he told her that Thornhill was referring to her as an “asset” that he must protect. He warned Porter that she might encounter resistance, and he assured her that he thought of this kind of behavior as unreasonable. “This talk of ‘assets,’” he explained, “may very well be true but an author is a human being and no self-respecting publisher would make a legal attempt to force an author to stay.”136 Lawrence knew well Porter’s aversion to being reduced to the status of publishing property, and he once again made sure to distinguish his own publishing philosophy as honorable and humane.

Porter, perhaps heartened by Lawrence’s continued support and understanding, did not allow herself to be swayed as she had been in 1940 by Donald Brace; instead, she resolutely resisted Little, Brown’s arguments for staying. She continued to appeal to their best instincts and capacity for civility, even though experience had taught her that publishers were more concerned with protecting their “properties” than they were

136 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, July 10, 1964.
concerned with allowing one of their authors the freedom to follow his or her best instincts. She recoiled from the dehumanizing aspects of being demoted from the status of author to that of asset, or property, and she attempted to counter their philosophy by stressing the very personal nature of her human bond of affection and loyalty with Seymour Lawrence. In doing so, she sought to diminish and deflect Thornhill's suggestion that she was bound to Little, Brown by virtue of the interests of the "stockholders" and the officers of the corporation. "It is always charming if people can make civilized arrangements with each other," she said pointedly,

and I share your hope that we may; but in truth, I regret deeply having persuaded myself to saying I would stay on with Little, Brown-Atlantic-Monthly. I can reason myself into anything, and have; but reason so often ignores the reality beyond the set of facts that is all reason has to go on. . . . I wish to continue with Seymour Lawrence as my editor and advisor because beyond a pleasant interview or two and a wonderful gala lunch with Mr. Thornhill elder and junior, and a fine time it was, Mr. Lawrence is—was—my only real bond, my only tie, to that house. And as I never had such a friend and partisan in my life before, so I do not expect ever to find another, and indeed there is no reason why I should look for one. It is no doubt absurd of me, but I expect you to sympathize with this point of view and way of feeling: I have not made so many friends in my life that I can afford to abandon one! In two publishing houses I was allowed to sit on a dark shelf for twenty years, tied hand and foot—they would do nothing for me, either here or in England, and they would not free me to do something for myself. Seymour Lawrence broke this knot for me, and I do not forget it, nor mistake the meaning. 137

Here Porter reminds the officers at Little, Brown that it was Lawrence who deserved credit for lifting her off the "dark shelf" and into the limelight. He did so, moreover, by being sensitive to his client's human limitations and by treating Porter as more than a literary commodity. Uncivil and in her mind inhumane business practices, she implied, would get them nowhere.

137 KAP to Mr. Davidson, July 15, 1964, SL Papers.
Despite Porter’s attempts to convince Arthur Thornhill, Jr., and others to cooperate pleasantly with her decision to leave, she did not feel that their treatment of her was fair. Little, Brown insisted upon a contingency clause, which demanded that she submit a preface for an anthology she had contracted to publish with Little, Brown.\(^\text{138}\) Porter reacted to the contingency clause on principle; all of her worst opinions about publishers were reaffirmed as a result of their failure to follow through on their promise to accept her decision to depart graciously. Porter was so bitter about Arthur Thornhill’s change of heart that she believed that he had behaved worse than Bill Jovanovich had when he resisted her leaving Harcourt, Brace and had refused to relinquish any rights to her books of short fiction.

Porter now distrusted all publishers and wanted nothing to do with any house. “You know of course the old publisher joke about publishing being a fine business if it wasn’t for the authors,” she told Lawrence. “Well, as an author, I say that goes for me, in reverse, doubled in spades. It isn’t even entertaining anymore to watch publishers tricking their authors while carrying on the big game of out-tricking each other. To hell with them, is my final sweet farewell.” Porter felt that her publishers had done all that they could to make her life “hell on hearth for all of these years.” She declared that she had had enough of “their indecencies.\(^\text{139}\)

Lawrence ignored her angry assertion that she wanted to nothing to do with Knopf, either. He wrote to Porter telling her not to despair, and then turned his attention immediately to encouraging her to fulfill her commitment to write a preface for Little,

\(^{138}\) Cyrilly Abels to KAP, August 26, 1964, KAP Papers.  
\(^{139}\) KAP to Seymour Lawrence, August 28, 1964, KAP Papers.
Brown; if she were to complete that preface, she would then be able to obtain an advance from Knopf. He also encouraged her to get to work organizing a book of essays and occasional writings. In this book, she would combine the pieces in *The Days Before* with additional writings. He also encouraged her to finish the Mather biography since he felt that the book would do quite well in the wake of the novel’s success.

As much as Lawrence tried to lift Porter from her despair, she continued to remember the times when her publishers had let her down, like the incident in which Mr. Thornhill did not come through with the money she had at one point requested to buy a house. She wondered how he could have been “so shortsighted as to what kind of thing that does to a human being, a mind a psychological state.” Their actions, she said, showed that “they [publishers] probably don’t think of writers as human.”

The writer’s resentment and animosity are palpable and would remain with her for the rest of her life. Lawrence could do nothing but encourage her to write with the hope that her fury would subside.

Porter’s anger toward her publishers was compounded by her circumstance of once again having to finish up certain projects before she could obtain the advance money she needed. Even after the success of *Ship of Fools*, the pattern of financial need and obligation to publishers continued. Porter owed taxes and had overspent while decorating a house that she had rented in Washington D.C. She was again financially strapped. At the same time, she was too embittered and anxious about the tenuous state of her professional affairs to be able to concentrate on even the smallest writing projects.

---

140 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, September 15, 1964, KAP Papers.
Lawrence was again in the position of trying to prod Porter into productivity. His reputation was on the line in his new position at Knopf, and another Porter book on the Knopf list would certainly be a propitious beginning. He resumed his familiar role of comforting and reassuring his friend, hoping that she would emerge from her apathy, despair, and inability to work: “Our SHIP OF FOOLS adventure still remains the most challenging and rewarding experience and the most pleasurable I have ever had as a publisher,” he cooed. “And we have others ahead.” At the bottom of the letter in a “P.S.,” he is explicit about his needs:

You are my daughter’s godmother and I wonder if you would be my literary godmother. This is a transition period for the house of Knopf, and in many ways a very crucial period, with the Knopfs retiring by the end of next year. It is up to me to prove in the months ahead that I am capable of continuing this distinguished imprint and I would dearly welcome your help and guidance. I want to strengthen our list of American fiction and I should like to see us publish writers of the calibre [sic] of J.F. Powers and Eudora Welty, for example. I would be very grateful for your counsel, now and for the future.14

It was very difficult for Porter to deny Lawrence anything, especially when he formulated his needs in such complimentary terms.

In her letter of response to Lawrence, however, Porter continued her diatribe against publishers and explained the latest conflict. She said that she would be better off not being published by anybody and that freedom from the “cat’s cradle of cross-purposes” she found herself embroiled in would at least give her the freedom once again to write. “It has been a nightmare,” she told him. “I shall never forget or recover from it.” The pressure had become more than she could handle. Yet while Porter had renounced the world of publishing, she had not renounced Lawrence: “Please tell me what you feel

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
I should do,” she offered. “I would be glad to help in any way I can.” She signed off this way: “With my love, your godmother-in-literature.” However torn apart Porter was over her publishing affairs, she still put Lawrence on a pedestal. In her mind, and in his mind, it was a “partnership.”

Although Porter had the best intentions for helping Lawrence as he launched his new career, as time wore on she became increasingly disappointed with the way their alliance was evolving. After eight months, his plans were still not settled. Porter had followed him to Knopf and negotiated a good contract with the help of her agent, Cyrilly Abels. In 1962, Porter had finally put aside her long-standing bias against agents in order to work with Cyrilly Abels, a dear friend whom she had known as the editor of Mademoiselle for years and trusted implicitly. Despite the encouraging advance that Abels helped to negotiate on Porter’s behalf, the writer was unenthusiastic about her new situation and did not feel particularly wanted or needed at Knopf. Predictably, Porter began to feel that her editor was no longer attentive to her needs.

A letter to Lawrence written in October of 1964 described her feelings of disillusionment and disappointment. Her sentiments mark the beginning of her unwillingness to endow him with Olympian stature; it was becoming clear that her feelings about publishers were beginning to infect her judgments of Lawrence. She acknowledged that her lifelong pattern of mistaking publishers for friends constituted a rather unfortunate merging of business and personal attachments:

141 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, September 21, 1964, KAP Papers.
142 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, September 22, 1964, KAP Papers.
143 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, October 29, 1963, KAP Papers.
144 Cyrilly Abels to KAP, August 26, 1964, KAP Papers.
Your letter this morning brought good news for the sweet bye-and-bye if it ever comes! But for me, relief is nowhere in sight, for it should come before day after tomorrow, and there is no word from any direction that gives the least hope. Oh Seymour, I am sure if either of us could have foreseen the disaster my attempt to change publishers would bring on me, we would have agreed it better for me to stay where I was. . . . But it is too late now, it is getting rapidly too late for anything. . . . The ironical thing is, I have by exact count under four different heads that do not include either the Knopf contract or my regular income from Little, Brown, exactly $25,000 that I could pick up any time I can pull my shattered nerves together and do certain pieces of work I do want to do, and would do, as I have in the past, without any money prospects at all: but I think I have had about all the horror I can take in this publishing business. . . . I have learned one lesson, but as usual I am afraid it comes too late. I shall never mistake another publisher for a friend! That is I imagine a long step forward, but the truth is, it is probably not important. . . . You don’t really need me, it seems to me now I would have done you a favor to stay with Little, Brown, and in spite of having to put up with Davison perhaps from time to time, my own life would not be the ruin it is. . . . Now please do not take anything in this letter to be even hinting that I have the faintest thought of suicide, or any desperate act. I have not. No matter what happens I shall stay right to the finish. A certain curiosity as to how far the misuse of my time and life and money and energies and mere existence can be carried and let me still survive. . . . I need to live longer because obviously there are still some things I need to learn about this world [my emphasis].

Here Porter painted Lawrence as responsible for the current upheavals in her life, whereas she was also suffering under the stress of health and tax problems. But she linked all of her discontents to the disruption and confusion she had been caused by following Lawrence. Her resentment about having followed him was also fueled by a hint of jealousy on her part, as she observed his career evolving and consuming all his energies, while she felt utterly lost and too “shattered” to accomplish any work. Her mental well-being, she revealed, had grown dependent upon Lawrence’s ability to devote his full

---

145 KAP informed Abels that “the news about the advance is encouraging within descreet limits. I have no feeling that I am particularly wanted at Knopf’s” (KAP to Cyrilly Abels, October 10, 1964, KAP Papers).
146 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, October 14, 1964, SL Papers.
147 Porter was usually behind on her tax payments, as when she told Lawrence that she must go “tomorrow or the next day—Friday is the time limit since my notice, and explain to the District Commissioner of Revenue why I have not paid the balance on my income tax, and I have been officially notified that steps
attention to her affairs. Now that he was unable to be the stable rock amidst the “quicksand” of her life, it was all too easy for her to blame him when she felt that familiar sinking of the heart.

Porter had become a victim of her own high expectations of Lawrence and of her hope that the intense bond she had developed with him would always remain as strong as it had been while he was at Atlantic-Little, Brown. Her frustrations with following her editor would only become more acute once Lawrence’s arrangement with Knopf dissolved. Not long after Porter wrote to Lawrence castigating herself for following him as an act of loyalty, he wrote to her announcing that he had left Knopf to form his own company. He knew exactly how to placate his friend’s emotions. He let Katherine Anne know “how much your friendship and loyalty mean to me as I embark upon my own.” He then reminded her that it was “a decisive moment and to know that you are with me is a great source of strength. You are the one author I have cherished more than any other and it will always be this way.” No one understood Porter’s fragile ego better than Lawrence; he used his knowledge to rekindle her loyalty, to soften her anger, and to remind her once again of their unique and precious bond. He also reminded her that their need for and dependence upon one another was mutual; both needed the cooperation and admiration of the other.

Porter went through her usual ruminations while deciding whether or not she should again follow Lawrence as he embarked upon an uncertain future. She told Cyrilly Abels that her current dilemma reminded her of the time when Donald Brace had “made

will be taken if I don’t pay it at once. It is overdue and gathering interest at a dizzying rate” (KAP to Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
such a point of loyalty in friendship that transcended business relations.” Although she regretted having acted against her desire and intuition to leave Harcourt, Brace in 1940 in order to remain faithful to Donald Brace, she nevertheless employed Brace’s argument regarding the importance of author-publisher loyalty when contemplating whether or not she should follow Lawrence. She told Abels that her “impulse was to go with Seymour because he wishes me to so deeply, and seems to be depending on me, and I do trust his motives and his ethics and his personal faith in my work—that is not to be treated lightly.” Although she felt compelled once again to maintain the fidelity of her bond to an editor, she was not at peace with her own thinking in the matter. Part of her still wished that she had “no publisher at all!”

Cyrilly Abels was positioned well to help Porter because her loyalty to her client’s interests was unwavering and because she was particularly astute about the politics of publishing. She was also wary about Porter’s tendency to blur the distinctions between business and friendship. Abels was, in short, practical-minded and able to distance herself from the tangled web of her client’s highly personal publishing relationships. Porter appreciated and respected but did not follow her agent’s advice to view her relationship with Lawrence without nostalgia or sentimentality. Abels tried to get Porter to see that Lawrence’s preoccupations with establishing his own firm would necessarily limit the time he could spend acting as her advisor and advocate. She also tried to get Porter to think about her decision to follow Lawrence with a mind to his motives, which

---

Seymour Lawrence, October 14, 1964, SL Papers).
148 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, October 29, 1964, KAP Papers.
149 KAP to Cyrilly Abels, November 5, 1964, KAP Papers.
150 KAP to Cyrilly Abels, November 5, 1964, KAP Papers.
were necessarily more self-serving now that he faced the daunting task of establishing himself within a highly competitive industry. It was not that Lawrence no longer deeply respected her work or their friendship but merely that Porter would have to scrutinize the circumstances of his new arrangements before she agreed to any new contracts and obligations.

Abels bluntly advised Porter that to follow Lawrence anywhere for reasons of friendship and out of a feeling of obligation was “not reasonable.” Lawrence might “assume” that Porter would follow him in both writing and in conversation because “that’s good business on his part.” But to ask her for a pledge outright was “another thing.”151 Porter expressed appreciation, telling Abels that she was “thinking along all the right ways about my future, but I have to tell you that I cannot walk out on Seymour until the time limit he has set for negotiation is ended.”152 Porter tried to appear as if she was considering the admonitions of her most trusted and savvy friend. In reality, her mind was set on pleasing Lawrence. As soon as he announced that he was on his feet and had arranged a new agreement with Delacorte Press, she informed Abels: “Now of course I am going with Seymour. I never had any other plan if he could by any means swing his project. It looks as if he has more than succeeded.”153 Lawrence had established his own company, Seymour Lawrence, Inc. His company’s affiliation with Delacorte Press was similar to the Atlantic Monthly’s arrangement with Little, Brown. He would recruit and edit authors, while Delacorte Press would provide financial backing and publishing services.

151 Cyrilly Abels to KAP, November 10, 1964, KAP Papers.
152 KAP to Cyrilly Abels, March 9, 1965, KAP Papers.
Almost immediately, Porter began to exhibit her usual reaction to having signed on to new contracts with yet another publishing company. One might imagine that she was glad to have her affairs settled once again but, as in the past, what she had really agreed to were more contracts and obligations: “If they do not press me too much for exact deadlines,” she told Abels,

let these dates stand. The trouble is publishers always begin to harass me when I show signs of lagging, and no matter what psychologists might be able to make of this, pressure of that sort simply throws me into a catatonic state, paralyzes my will, muddles my mind, and hurts my feelings. Let’s hope that if I don’t quite make the deadlines they will not begin to harass me about it; it will just delay things.  

Porter had reason to be apprehensive. In order to remain loyal to her beloved Lawrence and to maintain the continuity of their working relationship, she had blindly obligated herself to yet another unknown publishing house.

However bitter Porter felt toward publishers in general, she was never able to purge herself of her arguably self-destructive allegiance to the author-editor bond, a bond that she was drawn to irresistibly, a bond that fulfilled a deep need to be wanted, needed, even coveted. Her inability to shirk these bonds cannot be blamed exclusively on her need to perpetuate alliances wherein her faith in herself as an artist was continually bolstered and sustained. Porter’s editors were inextricably tied to the truest, most stable part of her identity; they cared more than friends, more than family, more than fellow writers about her dedication to writing fiction, her calling as a “truth-teller.”

While their imperfections were manifold and their expectations of her were artistically

---

154 KAP to Cyrilly Abels, March 19, 1965, KAP Papers.
155 Unrue, Truth and Vision 220.
misguided, a part of the writer needed their life-sustaining support more than she wanted her freedom. Porter knew better than most the pitfalls associated with publishers and publishing. Yet throughout her productive years, she would always choose fidelity to the author-editor covenant over a commonsense, self-interested approach to doing literary business. Abels might warn Porter and negotiate on her client’s behalf, but she would never be able to convince her client to act against her ingrained convictions. For better or for worse, Porter trusted Lawrence to manage her literary affairs in accordance with her high standards and her particular demands. If this were not to happen, she would be shattered.

Lawrence participated wholeheartedly in perpetuating an exalted view of their author-editor bond so that Porter was not the sole architect of the ever-growing myth that their togetherness was founded upon “a very acute and loving and faithful sense of loyalty and continuity in us both that outlives and outwears the petty meanness of the sharp businessmen who deal sharply in human blood.”156 The need between author and editor had been mutual from the outset, and Lawrence’s sensitivities enabled him to see the value of combating the dehumanizing elements in publishing, especially with extremely sensitive and high-maintenance writers like Porter. Any attempts to ignore the humanity of a writer or to classify the writer as an asset or a property, he well knew, might take a toll on the client both artistically and emotionally. Lawrence was vocal about his ambivalence regarding the ways the industry had changed with the advent of big business. He assured her that “[y]ou and I will go on together” and that “[y]ou have my profound commitment as long as I stay in publishing.” In essence, then, both writer
and editor agreed that, although following Lawrence had been a strain on Porter, the act constituted an important gesture of resistance to a publishing world that was changing, according to Lawrence, "not entirely for the good." They, in short, made a mutual commitment to maintain the humanity of their tie in the face of a marketplace that increasingly marginalized and discouraged the mixture of business with human sentiments and loyalties.

The lofty nature of Porter and Lawrence's promises to one another and their understanding that they would remain together through thick and thin made the shifting circumstances of their arrangement even more difficult for Porter to tolerate when her affairs were not always conducted in accordance with her standards. But Lawrence was not the only one whose circumstances had changed now that he was establishing his own company in conjunction with Delacorte Press. By 1967, Porter's health problems had limited her capabilities, and she had come to rely upon her close friend and attorney, Barrett Prettyman, to supervise her affairs and to rearrange her contracts so that she was relieved of the pressures of many of her obligations. As Porter biographers have pointed out, Porter developed romantic feelings toward her attorney, and he did preoccupy her thoughts and some of her time. Her correspondence with Lawrence, moreover, was necessarily limited now that she was working less. In the case of her Collected Essays

---

156 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, October 14, 1964, SL Papers.
157 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, October 22, 1964, SL Papers; in another letter to Porter written in 1964, Lawrence makes his intentions clear: "We shall go on and on together," he assures her, (Seymour Lawrence to KAP, March 19, 1962, KAP Papers).
158 Janice Stout explains that Porter engaged in a flirtation with Barrett Prettyman at the age of seventy-eight. Although Porter was open about her love for Prettyman, he "resented and vehemently denied Joan Givner's imputation of a love affair" (Stout 173).
and Occasional Writings, for instance, she left most of the work of organizing the book to her publishers.

During the last phase of her publishing relationship with Lawrence, incidents connected with Porter’s most recent publications provoked her anger against Lawrence and contributed to her complete rejection of him as her publisher in 1975. The incidents were relatively minor, but they involved some of the publishing principles that Porter had developed over the years, such as the idea that she never wanted her books to be remaindered. She was thus angered when she discovered that Lawrence had allowed her Collected Essays and A Christmas Story to be remaindered after the books had not sold as well as expected. Porter did not accept Lawrence’s explanation that Delacorte had printed too many copies of the books and had to “dispose of a quantity of each book as overstock in order to cut their losses.” When Lawrence did not act to protect her interests and stand up for some of her most heart-felt convictions, however impractical, she would blame him along with Delacorte Press. She was also angry at the acknowledgements Lawrence had incorporated into her Collected Essays without her permission, and she reacted angrily and openly to what she considered a presumptuous action on his part.

Porter had also been upset by an unfortunate incident involving Lawrence and Prettyman’s mutual decision to use an automatic pen signature to sign copies of her A Christmas Story. Lawrence and Prettyman had made the decision to replicate her signature in order to protect her precarious health during a period when they felt she

---

159 Lawrence defended himself against a number of attacks from Porter in a letter to her dated May 25, 1976, KAP Papers.
should not be burdened with such a task. According to Porter and some booksellers, however, this amounted to “fraud,” and Porter was humiliated by the incident. By 1975, Porter claimed to dislike Delacorte Press intensely, and she accused Lawrence of connecting her with a house that she said she would have never chosen to associate with on her own. If he had only kept his promise to go into business on his own, she claimed, she would never have suffered the indignity of associating with such an incompetent house.

During the mid-1970s, Porter’s correspondence with Lawrence shows that she was becoming even more critical and accusatory than she had ever been in the past, even though she would not suffer from her debilitating strokes until a few years later. In a “rejection” letter she wrote Lawrence wherein she renounced him as her publisher, she reminded him of past incidents that had disappointed her during the years he had been connected with Delacorte Press. She also made clear that she viewed his success as her failure: “I am very happy, too, that you have prospered so and are doing so well and apparently have found exactly the partnership you needed for your own good fortune, but for me it has certainly been a disaster.” Throughout the letter, Porter wrote as someone badly frustrated, even tormented, by the reality that she was slowly losing her capacity to control her own life. There is also a hint of jealousy that Lawrence was at the height of

160 See Givner 490.
161 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, December 2, 1967, SL Papers.
163 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, May 7, 1975, KAP Papers.
164 In February of 1977, Bill Wilkins, Porter’s friend and helper/editorial assistant during her later years, wrote a letter to the Editor and Chief of the Atlantic Monthly, Mr. Robert Manning, informing him that “Miss Porter suffered a stroke last Friday night and has had one or two additional ‘mini-seizures’ as her doctor chooses to call them” (W.R. Wilkins to Robert Manning, February 21, 1977, KAP Papers).
his professional powers. Porter dealt with her own feelings of inadequacy by lashing out and blaming someone dear to her.

The letter also reflected the overall sense of betrayal and disillusionment Porter felt with regard to her entire publishing history. Lawrence was unfortunate enough to become the primary target when she decided to release the toxic feelings of resentment she felt toward publishers and publishing, emotions that had been building over many years. Her "refusal" of Lawrence as her publisher can be read as her rejection of all publishers and publishing:

I do refuse you, I have already, I will again: You are not my publisher and you never will be. . . . Please take this for my last word: you are not my publisher. I have no publisher and I do not intend to have one. At least my good old Ship of Fools was deftly and magnificently handled by Mr. Thornhill and Little, Brown, and has put me out of the necessity for dealing with such people out of need. Yet, you know well that I dealt with people on this ground when I didn’t know where my next meal was coming from.  

Porter blamed Delacorte Press primarily for the “disappointments and humiliations” she felt she had endured after leaving Atlantic-Little, Brown, and she blamed Lawrence for connecting her with the press. But the target of her recriminations was clearly Lawrence, whom she attempted to wound by her suggestion that he had nothing to do with the success of her novel. Porter wanted to reject Lawrence because, like Brace, he had cultivated a relationship based upon loyalty and continuity. He had then allowed the intensity of their bond to dissipate when he launched a new phase of his career. Enduring the slow loosening of her bond with Lawrence was particularly difficult for Porter since she had accepted the disruption of a long period of indecision while her editor reestablished himself. When she did not feel that her act of loyalty toward him had been
adequately reciprocated, she blamed Lawrence for the time she felt she had lost and for the emotional strain she had endured.

Porter was also, in a sense, lashing out at Lawrence out of frustration because her own physical and creative powers were waning sharply, and Lawrence reminded her of what she wanted to be doing artistically but could not. He also represented her ascent to the pinnacle of her success as a writer, and perhaps that reminder was too painful. Unfairly, Porter lashed out at her editor, channeling all of her disappointments and fears into an outrageous critique of him. Her creative time clock was rapidly winding down, and her editor became the repository for the angry emotions the writer experienced when faced with the unthinkable horror of losing the most vital part of her identity and personhood.

When Lawrence began to rebuild his career and find success in connection with Delacorte Press, the lives of these two people ran in such opposite directions that it was impossible to keep their interdependency alive. Lawrence was increasingly devoted to establishing Seymour Lawrence, Inc., while Porter was bogged down with accidents, illnesses, and the difficulties of not having the strength or focus to finish up her writing projects. In her view, Lawrence had betrayed his commitment to her because as far as she could see he had learned to put business interests ahead of his client’s interests. In other words, it seemed to Porter that Lawrence was acting out of character by ignoring his authors and attending more to business concerns. Of course, Lawrence had numerous new preoccupations and responsibilities, but Porter was incapable of letting her editor

---

165 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, May 7, 1975, KAP Papers.
move on to success beyond her, especially if that success meant that she was no longer at the center of his professional concerns. On a more basic level, she simply missed Lawrence’s friendship. And she missed the luxury of being confident in the knowledge that Lawrence was exerting considerable energy protecting her interests.

Lawrence’s willingness to allow her *Collected Essays* to be remaindered from the original price of $12.50 to $1.98 was the last straw. In her view, he had failed to protect her rights and “thrown her book away.” She gave herself away, however, when she articulated why she felt no further communication necessary: “This closes up, I hope, the disaster I have suffered from looking upon you as a friend and leaving my publisher to go with you on your wild goose chase as an act of loyalty.” Her real grievance against Lawrence, finally, was not primarily that she felt that her publishing affairs had been mishandled. What really bothered her and left her in a state of blazing anger and resentment was the sense of betrayal she felt when she thought that the trust between them had dissolved. She thought that she had plenty of evidence to prove that Lawrence no longer played the role of protector and nourishing friend and advocate. He had led her to believe that nothing was more important than remaining loyal to his most coveted and talented authors, and yet he had moved on in his career, become successful without her, and, in her view, neglected her interests.

For Porter, feeling that she was no longer needed and that she was no longer an essential component of Lawrence’s success was devastating. When we listen to her words of retribution, we listen to a woman who felt that the integrity of her bond with

---

166 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, July 30, 1975, KAP Papers.
167 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, July 30, 1975, KAP Papers.
him, in what for her had amounted to a covenant, had been violated. When we can understand what Porter expected from her editors and publishers, which was consummate loyalty, commitment, and protection of her rights and wishes, we see that, in her eyes, relationships with editors should reflect her love, dedication, and lifelong fidelity to her vocation as a writer. When she wrote to Lawrence asking him to send her new agent, Joan Daves, the materials she needed in order to determine that the "business side" of her affairs were in order, she was throwing a stone with which she aimed to hurt Lawrence for his perceived violation of these principles.\(^{168}\) She knew Lawrence would understand the gist of her anger because he would have known that, in the language of publishing they had both embraced, business concerns were always secondary to friendship, loyalty, continuity, and an almost chivalrous protection of the author's interests. In sending him a curt business letter, she had hoped to convey her sense of outrage that their relationship had become so practical, so reduced and petty, and such a denial of the intimate and complex alliance they had once shared.

Regardless of how much Porter abhorred the "petty meanness" of publishers and detested their practice of trying to mold artists into salable commodities, she nevertheless allowed herself to be seduced by the intimacy and loyalty that her editors promised. She also allowed her own life to be shaped by their insistence that she transform herself into a novelist. As long as her author-editor alliances remained intact, she was bound to her publishers and compelled at least to promise them that she would meet their demands. As soon as these alliances began to fracture or dissipate, however, her disappointment, bitterness, and sense of rejection were fierce. Like Porter's memorable heroine, Granny

\(^{168}\) KAP to Seymour Lawrence, June 21, 1976, KAP Papers.
Weatherall, whose groom never appeared on her wedding day, Porter felt “jilted” when she felt herself losing the complete and unconditional support and protection of Donald Brace and Seymour Lawrence.

Knowing the creative and personal “horror” that Porter suffered while trying to deliver the novel that made these relationships possible, one might imagine that the writer would have at one point extricated herself from her attachment to these author-editor bonds while her creative powers were still strong. But as we have seen, she needed her editors for practical reasons of course, but also to fill an empty space in her heart, a void created in part by the love denied to her as a child. Porter’s editors were critical to her identity as an artist; they sustained her. Seymour Lawrence referred to himself as her “faithful editor, admirer, publisher, and friend,” and he told her repeatedly in so many ways that “he could think of no book in recent memory” that approached the “quality of greatness” he perceived in the writing she had done for her novel.169 While the novel would become highly controversial in its own time, Porter could depend upon Lawrence’s unwavering admiration.

Porter could not and did not resist the luxury of such treatment, regardless of the untold misery the novel caused her over the course of the most productive years of her writing life. She was incapable of heeding the advice that she had given to Eudora Welty and James F. Powers when she warned against succumbing to pressure from publishers eager to transform talented short fiction writers into novelists. Instead, she did whatever

---

169 Seymour Lawrence to KAP, November 14, 1958, KAP Papers; Seymour Lawrence to KAP, October 8, 1958, KAP Papers.
was necessary to maintain her covenants with men who provided for her in ways that transcended her practical needs in astonishing ways.

The manifold difficulties Porter confronted as a short story writer under pressure to write a novel provide a script for a painful, yet compelling story. That story of deception, anxiety, despair, and procrastination is instrumental in explaining the writer's infamous creative silences. Through analysis of her publishing correspondence, we discover the human stories behind those silences, stories that illustrate the remarkable power that editors can have in shaping a writer's creative and practical agenda. These stories, especially the one between Porter and Lawrence, are also love stories of a kind. Both Lawrence and Porter understood that their admiration and dependence were mutual, and that in each other they had found the kind of closeness that one is fortunate to find once or twice in a lifetime. Their intimacy was possible, in part, because their alliance was asexual. It was predicated upon the writer's craft rather than upon the complications of sexual intimacy and domestic cohabitation. Perhaps for these reasons, Porter's alliances with editors were more profound and lasting than most of her romantic alliances. If Seymour Lawrence felt that he was being treated somewhat like a spurned lover when he received his rejection letter, perhaps he was not far off in his assumption. The disintegration of Porter's bond with her editors represented, after all, her true divorces.
Chapter Four

“An Angel of All the Virtues”:
Editor and Agent, Cyrilly Abels

Katherine Anne Porter’s intimate, complex, and at times contentious publishing alliances with Donald Brace and Seymour Lawrence make it almost impossible to imagine the writer as capable of sustaining a harmonious, fruitful, and tension-free professional association. Yet that is exactly how Porter’s professional friendship with Cyrilly Abels can be described. Porter worked with Cyrilly Abels when Abels was the managing editor at Mademoiselle from the mid-1940s until 1960. In 1960, Abels left the fashion magazine to become associate editor of The Reporter from 1960-1962. In 1962, she launched an independent career as a literary agent. Until her death in 1975, she performed as Porter’s literary agent.

In some respects, Porter’s long professional friendship with Abels resembled the writer’s alliances with her editors, Donald Brace and Seymour Lawrence: Porter relied upon her friend’s continuous and devoted support in the same way that she required loyalty and intimacy from her editors and publishers. Abels helped Porter in a variety of ways ranging from assisting her client with fashioning her wardrobe for public performances to offering practical, emotional, and financial support. Ultimately, though, Porter’s friendship with Abels distinguished itself from her editorial alliances with Brace
and Lawrence. Abels, according to Porter, possessed a “genius for friendship.” Her unstinting devotion to Porter earned her the rare distinction of never having disappointed the writer’s personal or professional expectations. In her professional alliance with Abels, Porter finally broke the cycle of forming close professional friendships destined to dissolve into bitterness and disappointment. Abels was able to sustain the writer’s confidence and trust throughout their alliance, and the friendship between these women remained strong and deeply meaningful to both until Abels’s death.

In view of Porter’s long-standing bias against agents, the strong bond that Porter developed with Cyrilly Abels during the twilight years of her writing life is surprising and a testament to their remarkable personal and professional friendship. Donald Brace had indoctrinated Porter into the luxuries of working within a family-owned firm wherein friendships between authors and editors were cultivated and promoted. Many of these family-owned firms, including Random House, Alfred A. Knopf, and Charles Scribner’s Sons, prided themselves in publishing writers of the highest caliber, even if doing so meant that short-term profits were sacrificed. These firms invested in talented artists and cultivated prestigious and profitable backlists. Many writers affiliated with these houses developed close friendships with their editors and publishers. At the same time, many writers also employed the services of literary agents who handled their contract negotiations. Porter’s long-standing judgment that agents were meddling and unnecessary had unfortunate consequences. Without the representation of an agent

1 KAP to Cyrilly Abels, typed by assistant “gw”, October 22, 1975, KAP Papers.
2 Jason Epstein describes how the roles of agents have changed since the 1950s: “Though our authors relied upon their agents to negotiate their contracts with us, for many of them Random House was their family as much as it was ours. Today most publishing imprints have dissolved within their vast media conglomerates, and many authors now depend upon their agents as they once did upon their publishers for general sustenance. But forty years ago, agents were mere peripheral necessities, like dentists, consulted as needed, not the dominant figures in the lives of authors that many of them have become” (Epstein 6).
throughout the most vital years of her writing life, the writer’s alliances with her editors and publishers were badly tainted once Porter discovered, always too late, that she was unhappy with the ways that her publishers had handled her literary properties. Thus while Porter believed for years that agents would only complicate her professional affairs and dilute the intimacy she so valued with her editors and publishers, in reality the opposite was true. Her lack of knowledge about how to protect her rights led to continual conflicts with her publishers. The tensions that arose from these conflicts interfered with and threatened the friendships and loyalties that she had developed over the years with men like Donald Brace and Seymour Lawrence.

When Porter finally embraced Cyrilly Abels as her agent in 1962 because she was a trusted and dear friend, the writer was already set in her ways, and the most productive years of her writing life were behind her. Nevertheless, even at this late stage in her creative life, Cyrilly Abels played an important role as Porter’s personal advocate. Abels was someone whose integrity Porter never questioned. Through her generosity of spirit and the graceful way she won Porter’s complete devotion, Abels positioned herself as a healing influence in the writer’s life. Porter was influenced profoundly by having for the first time a professional ally who never treated her as an investment and who never demanded that she be anything but exactly the kind of the artist that she wanted to be. Gratitude and appreciation are emotions that permeate the letters Porter wrote to a friend whom she called “Angel” or “Blessed Angel.”

Acting in the role of Porter’s guardian angel, Abels provided honesty, stability, friendship, and representation when Porter desperately needed it. She enjoyed and profited from her client’s success at times, but unlike the writer’s editors and publishers,
she was never invested financially in her success. She might have pushed Porter into projects that would have contributed to serious bouts of anxiety and creative paralysis, but she never did. What she did do was to be there always for Porter in a multitude of ways. Porter therefore came to believe that her friend's capacity for goodness and virtue were seemingly limitless.

In view of the pattern in Porter's professional relationships of trust and intimacy followed by disillusionment and rejection, it is remarkable that the writer's admiration and loyalty toward Abels never wavered. How was Abels capable of maintaining the intimacy and trust of her friend throughout their long friendship? The reasons are numerous, but among them is that, as the managing editor of Mademoiselle, Abels was never in a position of having advanced money to Porter or of having signed contracts with the writer. Abels was therefore never forced to pressure Porter for manuscripts. Likewise, as Porter's agent, Abels was thrilled whenever Porter gave her a piece to publish, and she was eager to make profits for the writer on her already published writings when possible. But unlike Brace and Lawrence, Abels was never in the awkward position of having to coax her friend into productivity.

A professional alliance wherein Porter never felt pressured by literary obligations and deadlines was not surprisingly one that Porter cherished. It was a recipe for a friendship that would remain untainted by the pressures associated with publishing houses concerned primarily with getting a return on their investments in authors. The Porter-Abels alliance was thus never strained with the kinds of rifts and disappointments that the writer faced repeatedly with her editors, men who were unable to waver from
their agenda to extract a novel from Porter, an ambition that frequently created tension in their otherwise harmonious alliances with the writer.

Beyond the convenient reality that Abels never felt the necessity of pressuring Porter to write, there were qualities in Abels that Porter clearly idealized. In the practical sphere of business, Abels was capable of negotiating effectively within the world of publishing with an efficiency and objectivity that Porter clearly admired but could not emulate. From the outset, Abels also distinguished herself by virtue of her ability to make her client understand her market worth. As the managing editor of Mademoiselle, Abels understood the prestige that a writer like Porter brought to the magazine, and she paid Porter in accordance with her value. In doing so, she contributed to the writer’s ability to see herself as a professional capable of commanding substantial fees. Abels thus bolstered Porter’s artistic self-image and inspired her to believe in herself as an author capable of commanding the attention of popular audiences.

As an agent, Abels continued to ensure that her client was treated fairly in the marketplace, and for the first time Porter had someone to negotiate contracts and advances on her behalf. Abels also earned Porter’s respect because she was a pioneer in a predominantly male profession, and becoming an agent was an avenue through which women were able to gain influence within the profession.⁴ Abels left the security of her salaried editorial positions to become an independent literary agent, and she did so with admirable confidence and determination, qualities that Porter admired and associated with the strong women she depicted in her writing, including the writer’s mythical

---

⁴ Publishing historian James L. West III explains that because publishing was dominated by men during the first half of the century, one of the “earliest and best ways for a woman to enter publishing was to work as a literary agent” since women “faced less discrimination in this field than in any other branch of publishing, and they quickly proved themselves adept and successful” (West III 88).
feminist heroine, Circe, the demi-goddess portrayed in “A Defense of Circe.”⁴ When advising Porter about the character of the men she was negotiating with in the world of publishing, including Seymour Lawrence, Abels demonstrated a talent for discerning motive and character, and her advice was often shrewd and practical rather than dictated by emotion. In her no-nonsense approach to business, Abels was blessed with Circe’s insight and feminine grace. At the same time, she was effective, organized, and diligent like fictional heroines Granny Weatherall and Sophia Jane Rhea.

Porter’s fictional heroines Granny Weatherall and Sophia Jane Rhea excelled in the virtues of cleanliness, discipline, and order at times at the expense of suppression of the more tender, maternal, and nurturing aspects of their natures. In her constant and unconditional support of Porter, Abels demonstrated that, like Porter’s heroines, she brought a disciplined work ethic to her professional endeavors. At the same time, she demonstrated a remarkable patience and the ability to offer limitless praise and boundless generosity. Since her praise of Porter’s beauty and literary talent were not contingent on the writer’s ability to provide her with manuscripts, there was a selfless quality about her constancy and support, almost a maternal quality.

Darlene Unrue has observed that Porter felt a lifelong and deep-seated sense of emotional pain and longing owing to her mother’s death when she was a young child. Her mother’s death left a void, a feeling of emptiness that was filled only partially by the love she received from her grandmother. Unrue points out that Porter imagined that her mother’s love was perhaps kinder and gentler than the love that she received from her grandmother, a disciplinarian.⁵ In view of Porter’s longing, it is entirely possible that

⁵ Unrue, Katherine Anne Porter’s Poetry 40-43.
Abels in some small way fulfilled Porter’s craving for a feminine support that was constant, dependable, and compassionate.

The multitude of ways that Porter extravagantly praised her friend for her “angelic” virtues shows that Porter idealized Abels as a sort of paragon of feminine virtue. For Porter, Abels represented a degree of moral purity and perfection that was almost otherworldly; perhaps she saw in her friend qualities that she wanted to believe her mother possessed. The nurturing and generosity of spirit that Abels showered upon Porter may have represented to the writer the kind of unconditional support that she missed as a child when the only kind of maternal love she knew was from her authoritative grandmother, a woman who undoubtedly loved her grandchildren but was over-worked, determined to provide for a bereft young family, and disciplinarian by necessity.

In Abels, then, Porter had found a professional woman whom she admired as a businesswoman, combined with someone who, with no children of her own and ample economic security, was willing to indulge Porter in order to enhance the writer’s happiness and sense of well-being. Whereas Porter constantly received unwanted attention from numerous individuals, most of whom had written requests and could be drains on the writer’s time, a letter or a call from Abels meant a delightful interruption, a dose of attention that Porter found rejuvenating, soothing, and reassuring. Thus while Porter looked to men like Brace and Lawrence for nurturing and support, and received it within limits, in Abels Porter rounded out her professional support system. Abels was a friend and professional associate who remained devoted and loyal to Porter in ways perhaps only an ideal maternal figure might be capable. She, in sum, represented to
Porter a feminine ideal, someone whose professional prowess Porter deeply admired and whose personal qualities indulged the writer's spirit and inspired eloquent tributes.

A discussion of Abels the agent can only be properly placed into context if we first understand Abels the managing editor of Mademoiselle, where she worked from the mid-1940s until 1960. Abels dramatically enriched a young women's fashion magazine by transforming it into a medium for the presentation of writers including Katherine Anne Porter, Dylan Thomas, Truman Capote, Carson McCullers, James Baldwin, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, and Robert Penn Warren. During her tenure at Mademoiselle, Abels developed a strong and mutually beneficial professional friendship with Porter. The two became more than professional associates; they developed a meaningful personal friendship based upon a mutual and deep-seated professional respect for one another.

Abels's determination to make Mademoiselle more than a superficial fashion magazine gave Porter a profitable outlet for her occasional writings. When she submitted a piece for publication, she could depend upon receiving generous praise and ample compensation. There were many occasions when financial compensation from publishing in Mademoiselle brought welcome relief, and Porter thanked her friend this way: "You are the only editor I ever knew who paid the ones you respect as much as you can wring out of the Box Office. But then, and I hope you'll know I mean this tenderly and admiringly, you are by no means a typical editor."
Abels’s willingness to pay Porter well for her submissions made an important difference to the writer practically and psychologically. The writer’s inability to deliver a novel to her publishers over the years meant that though she had enjoyed critical praise, she had been a financial liability until she finally published *Ship of Fools* in 1962. The refrain she heard continually from her publishers regarding the novel, compounded by her debt to them, contributed to feelings of self-reproach and inadequacy. Abels provided a forum wherein anything that Porter submitted was accepted with elation and gratitude. Abels not only professed her own belief in her friend’s “genius,” but she continually passed on praise from others. Porter was, for instance, thrilled with the panel members at the magazine who evaluated her piece, “Marriage is Belonging.” Porter clearly found the reactions from the staff members refreshing, and she told Abels that she “loved the generosity of the young Panelers—they must be young, I feel sure—who don’t hold back their words, but just praise freely and sweetly, knowing what they like, and trusting their own standards.”

When we consider how Porter’s short stories were treated as consolation prizes, albeit precious ones, by editors and publishers who viewed the writer’s short stories as the next best thing to a novel, it is easy to understand why Porter felt gratified when judged by young readers who approached her writings without preconceptions and with a willingness to express their enthusiasm without reservation.

After years of working within an inflexible and demanding publishing establishment, Porter found the prospect of writing articles for popular magazines like *Mademoiselle* and *Vogue* liberating as well as lucrative. It was empowering for Porter to realize that she was capable of earning a thousand rather than a hundred dollars or less for an article. In addition, the opportunity to write for these magazines helped Porter to

---

* KAP to Cyrilly Abels, February 9, 1953, KAP Papers.
develop a certain degree of independence from her publishers; she now had another avenue for earning income besides teaching, lecturing, or collecting advances. While Porter was proud of the contributions she had made earlier in her career to small, unprofitable literary journals like *Transition* or the *Southern Review*, she also defended her choice to publish in popular magazines, and she considered herself to have been one of the writers who fought the battle to be published profitably in commercial venues. The opportunity to reach a large audience and to gain new readers, moreover, was gratifying.

Porter was offended in 1958 when a poem she submitted to the British publication *Encounter* was rejected on the grounds that the piece had already been published in a popular magazine, *Mademoiselle*. She explained to the British publisher of *Encounter*, Fred Warburg, that she had originally sent the poem “After a Long Journey” to “an editor [Abels] who would send me a good check for it”: “I have no exemptions from the ordinary human financial responsibilities,” she explained, “and I have no other commodity for sale.” Porter’s scathing letter to Fred Warburg intended to scold him for an elitism she regarded as stuffy, impractical, and outdated.

Porter appreciated the benefits of financial compensation and wide readership that publishing in magazines like *Mademoiselle* provided, but she enjoyed writing for the magazine for other reasons as well. Writing for Abels came as a welcome reprieve, even escape, from the much more daunting task of creating *Ship of Fools*. The articles she wrote gave her the chance to write about life experiences. They were at once

---

9 In a letter to the British publisher Fred Warburg, Porter explained: “I was really one of those who fought that war to the finish in this country, and considered it won at least in part when magazines which could afford to pay well would be happy to publish the same kind of things as the magazines which could not afford to pay” (KAP to Fred Warburg, January 8, 1958, KAP Papers).

10 KAP to Fred Warburg, January 8, 1958, KAP Papers
autobiographical and fictional. Whatever the chosen subject, Porter was able to express herself freely and in accordance with her inspiration and whims. When writing "Marriage is Belonging" (1951), for instance, Porter confessed that it was not easy at first and that initially she felt compelled to stick to some of the themes that she and Abels had discussed might be appropriate to the subject. Soon enough, however, the essay began to write itself, as she let her "mind free to pick up its own article out of the air." She then went on to say that she did hope that Abels would like it: "When I finally let all holds go and just wrote as I pleased," she explained, "I had a fine time, and it ought to show through a little, somewhere!"¹¹ Porter could be assured that Abels would not have any quibbles with the writer for letting her imagination take over. "Marriage is Belonging" was so popular that Mademoiselle posted an ad so that readers could order reprints of the essay.¹² Other pieces written for Mademoiselle and reprinted in Porter’s Collected Essays and Occasional Writings include “The Necessary Enemy” (published in Mademoiselle as “Love and Hate” in 1948), “Reflections on Willa Cather” (1952), “A Christmas Story” (1958, not published in Collected Essays), “A Defense of Circe” (1954), “St. Augustine and the Bullfight (1955), and the poem, “After a Long Journey” (1957).

Another reason that Porter found publishing in Mademoiselle pleasurable was that she was not required to write in any particular genre or on any particular subject. On one occasion, Porter complained that “editors have a way—not YOU, the others—of wanting something like they have had before, and I can’t promise one single thing that

¹¹ KAP to Cyril Abels, August 5th and 6th, 1951, KAP Papers.
¹² Reprints of the article, published in October, 1951, were advertised in the magazine. The article was advertised this way: “A top-ranking American author’s sensitive and perceptive analysis of what it takes for two people to go on growing together and in the same direction.”
Abels understood and appreciated Porter’s creative process, and she well knew how much Porter suffered from having to follow a strict creative agenda. She would not think of adding to that pressure. She strove successfully to make Porter feel needed and important without adding to a chorus of literary professionals, all intent upon extracting a specific story or piece from her, within a certain time frame.

Abels enjoyed more freedom in the ways she chose to handle the professional side of her relationship with Porter because, unlike Donald Brace or Seymour Lawrence, she was not the writer’s publisher and was therefore freed from having to cope with the pressures of contracts, deadlines, and mounting debt. As Porter’s publishers, Donald Brace and Seymour Lawrence occasionally offered their client assurances that there was no need to panic in the face of deadlines, but the undercurrents of anxiety regarding the writer’s failure to deliver manuscripts were unceasing, and the associated strain eroded even the closest author-editor bonds.

Perhaps because she never felt compelled to write for Abels, Porter longed to submit more pieces to the magazine. In 1956 while living in Southbury, Connecticut, Porter was under pressure to finish *Ship of Fools* for Seymour Lawrence; she wrote to Abels that she was experiencing a “bitter, arid period” while trying to “slog through” the novel that she had hoped would be done. She lamented that there “are so many things . . . I want to do, even besides your story and your piece about the writer. . . . I long to see you, but I long even more to send you something to print, and that isn’t altogether as self-seeking as it sounds, I hope, for you would be pleased too, I believe—but God knows, I would be!”

13 KAP to Cyrilly Abels, December 31, 1960, KAP Papers.
14 KAP to Cyrilly Abels, July 7, 1956, KAP Papers.
Porter often confided to her friend the frustration of feeling confined both personally and creatively until she finished the novel: “I look forward to a little freedom some day,” she told Abels, “but I am afraid it is the kind one only finds in Heaven; I'll settle for much less, and by the end of next May I should be able to fetch a deep breath and see what comes next.” On another occasion, Porter imagined how she might behave once she was finished with the novel; again, the writer invokes images that make one think that she is an inmate eager for release. “[I]n a very little while, I’m going to be free,” she muses,

so far as a human being ever is, so far as a writer could be, and oh I do look forward to it; I am afraid I shan’t know how to behave, but will get noisy and obstreperous and disorderly and out of shape as I am told I did after the Poetry Center Reading. . . . Toujours gai [sic], what the hell-always the lady! – or so I hope, and I don’t mean the lady drunk!

Abels could not liberate Porter from the burden of her publishing obligations. But by encouraging Porter to write for Mademoiselle, Abels could offer financial relief and artistic autonomy. As much as Porter’s publishers would have seen Porter’s occasional writings as a distraction from her more pressing obligations to them, Porter explained in her introduction to The Days Before that the writing she did for magazines and the fiction she wrote “helped and supported each other”: “I needed both.”

Abels was not only helpful to Porter artistically and financially; she also assisted Porter in finding appropriate garments for public appearances. In her role as editor, she understood the importance of extending herself for writers beyond her official duties. Her editorial philosophy was therefore consistent with Max Perkins’s recognition that editorial duties required broad definition. Abels thus responded and catered to Porter’s

---

15 KAP to Cyrilly Abels, August 1, 1958, KAP Papers.
16 KAP to Cyrilly Abels, April 7, 1957, KAP Papers.
feminine needs. In tending to practical affairs such as clothes shopping that required the attention of another woman, Abels complemented the very different kind of support the writer received from her editors, Donald Brace and Seymour Lawrence. Like the young panelists at Mademoiselle, moreover, Abels offered praise freely, liberally, and genuinely. She assured Porter of her beauty, graciousness, and brilliance, unabashed approbation that Porter welcomed and needed. Just as Lawrence’s admiration for Porter was heartfelt, so too was Abels remarkably and unselfishly devoted.

Abels was well situated to help Porter with her wardrobe because she lived at the center of the fashion world in New York. She enjoyed shopping, possessed her own sense of style, and was surrounded by the fashionable people who worked for Mademoiselle. She was therefore non judgmental of the Porter who exhibited herself boldly in the dramatic, stylized, glamorous photographs taken by the photographer George Platt Lynes. Abels considered Porter’s concern with appearance and style completely natural, especially considering the very public nature of the writer’s life. She intuitively understood that, as a beautiful woman with the kind of bone structure that made her a striking model, Porter would naturally seek to create a persona during performances that would accentuate her physical attributes and ageless beauty, a beauty enhanced by a low, raspy voice that captivated audiences. On stage, Porter wore “an elaborate evening gown, with long gloves and flowers, her trademark silvery white hair beautifully coiffed.”1 8 The practical support that Abels offered helped Porter in her quest to present herself publicly in the most dramatic light possible. True to the multiple roles demanded of editors, then, Abels adapted to and met the specific needs of her client. In facilitating Porter’s search for appropriate and affordable garments, she helped her

18 Stout 167.
friend to fashion a memorable public persona, one that charmed audiences and enhanced the writer’s reputation.

Abels occasionally sent out employees at the magazine to look for clothing. On one occasion when Porter was looking for an evening gown, Abels kept her informed:

Neither Edie Raymond (the gal who performed so well for us before) nor I have been able to find even a picture that looked remotely like something you would want to wear. Edie suggests that you might like to go to one or two evening dress houses when you come to New York this week. If so, just let me know ahead and she will call to say you’re expected. 19

On another occasion, Abels informed Porter that the “gal who did so well on the black velvet dress for you should be back from vacation the middle of next week and I’ll give her the picture to see if she can come up with something as pretty.”20 When the perfect garment was too expensive, Abels would search for it wholesale. In addition, she sent Porter gifts, including housecoats and other items that invariably delighted Porter.21 In a letter thanking Abels for an exquisite garment, Porter exclaimed that “[y]our unbelievably giddy and delightful thingamabob with pleat has just been lying about here in its tissue paper to be taken out and shaken and held up against my figger [sic] and looked at with skeptical eyes—I don’t really believe there is any such garment, but it is lovely to think so!”22

Although Abels kept Porter abreast of fashion trends and facilitated her friend’s ability to shop during times when the writer was busy teaching and lecturing, her gifts and support extended far beyond exchanges about clothing. Abels’s generosity knew no bounds. When Porter moved from place to place, Abels would find a way to mark the

---

19 Cyrilly Abels to KAP, November 3, 1958, KAP Papers.
20 Cyrilly Abels to KAP, February 25, 1959, KAP Papers.
21 Cyrilly Abels to KAP, October 15, 1958, KAP Papers.
22 KAP to Cyrilly Abels, June 25, 1958, KAP Papers.
occasion. When Porter arrived at the University of Michigan, for instance, Abels sent her a bottle of cognac. Porter blessed her friend’s “extravagant soul” and said that she was “sumply [sic] not used to such likker [sic], though heaven knows I’d like to be!” She said the bottle was waiting for her “like a treasure, always there, a source, real riches, ready to cash against an emergency, a ten-carat diamond it would be inappropriate to wear now, but of course, any minute now, I may be presented in court, and it will come in handy.”

On another occasion, Abels sent her friend a Christmas present from her mother’s bridal chest. Porter praised the “incredibly fine and delicate sheets and pillow cases.” Awed that Cyrilly would part with such beautiful personal possessions, Porter responded by saying that it was her “present forever, all the rest of my Christmases and birthdays and whatever days one gets presents.” She then wondered, as she often did, what she might do to delight Cyrilly and to repay her generosity.

The friendship between these two women might appear superficial and perhaps even self-serving if one wanted to believe that Abels was so solicitous of Porter only because she wanted the writer to think of Mademoiselle first when she had something to publish. She did want to publish Porter and was completely open about her intentions, as was Porter open about her enthusiasm for publishing in Mademoiselle. To describe their friendship as mutually self-serving, however, would be to misinterpret the essence of a multi-faceted, unusual, and extraordinary friendship and to misrepresent these women’s intentions toward one another. The varied exchanges between these professional women over the years make it impossible to believe that they flattered and complimented one another simply because they were useful to one another. To begin with, Abels was a

23 KAP to Cyrilly Abels, September 16, 1953, KAP Papers.
24 KAP to Cyrilly Abels, December 1, 1960, KAP Papers.
great comfort to Porter throughout the years when she was trying to finish the novel and after the novel was finished when Porter was often too tired to feel anything but depression and exhaustion.

Abels was a constant yet almost invisible presence who called and wrote to her friend frequently without being in any way demanding or intrusive. Instead, she soothed Porter with a gentle hand. In February of 1957, for instance, she sent Porter words of encouragement: “Every little bit is to the good – on the novel –,” she said, “and you and I both know that just as long as it’s going, even if slowly, it’s all right. . . . I know there couldn’t be too much more to do and that whatever it is when it’s done it will be wonderful.”\(^{25}\) When the book was finally released, Abels seemed to be in a daze of admiration; she wrote several letters to Porter calling it a “masterpiece” written with a “maturity” and “acuteness” of vision. She then tells Porter that she “must have a deep recognition of what you’ve done in that book of yours.”\(^{26}\)

During the aftermath of the novel, Porter wrote frankly to Abels about the difficulties she was facing while trying to cope with the physical and mental drain associated with the trappings of success, including publicity, over exposure, and exhaustion. Abels demonstrated an understanding of why Porter was suffering with sunken spirits when theoretically she should have been elated and relieved. She was familiar with Porter’s vulnerabilities, and within this context she understood how the rewards of success could be at once exhilarating and dubious:

Isn’t it maybe, in some part, due to the aftermath of finishing your book? You’ve lived with it for so long, you’ve given of yourself to it so much, that it must be an empty feeling to no longer have it with you (in one sense). . . . Plus, of course, the

\(^{25}\) Cyrilly Abels to KAP, February 27, 1957, KAP Papers.
\(^{26}\) Cyrilly Abels to KAP, 1962, KAP Papers.
constant tax on your nervous system of people, bills, etc., and just the great need, as you say, for a quiet time by yourself."

On so many occasions, Abels spoke to Porter as much more than a professional colleague. Her willingness to go out of her way to help, her sensitivity, and her ability to understand human nature were qualities that she drew upon heavily in her roles as editor and later as agent.

In her letters to Abels, Porter often revealed the most attractive and generous side of her nature, the part of herself that openly aspired to a level of virtue and goodness that she could see so clearly reflected in her friend. Donald Brace and Seymour Lawrence were less apt to evoke from their client the poetic expressions of friendship and encouragement that enlivened Porter's correspondence with Abels. When there was real suffering in their lives, these two women wrote about it openly, and they offered words of sympathy and comfort to one another. Abels wrote to Porter movingly about the death of family members, including a niece who died in childbirth, her parents, and the death of her beloved husband, Jerome Weinstein. In a letter fragment, Porter responds to Abels's description of her mother's death and the Jewish family rituals that were followed. "Cyrilly darling," she writes,

"Please don't think it strange if I say thank you for your letter about your mother; it was such a tender story of family love and brave life and death, I have been thinking of you ever since as you go through this hour-by-hour loosening of this life-bond; it is dismaying how much acceptance is required of us before the sense of loss is softened."

Porter was eloquent when expressing emotions about the tender and difficult times in life, and she was equally articulate when writing about friendship and virtue.

---

27 Cyrilly Abels to KAP, October 23, 1961, KAP Papers.
28 KAP to Cyrilly Abels, December 10, 1956, KAP Papers.
The writer's deep respect and affection for Abels inspired in her the highest contemplations about friendship and virtue. Abels must have felt deeply appreciated when time after time Porter offered effusive expressions of admiration and gratitude. On one occasion, for instance, Porter declared that Abels had been and “will be an angel of all the virtues, and I love virtue, especially when it is so naturally becoming to anyone as it is to you.” She continues: “I try to imitate it, I admire it, I believe in it. And I love you dearly.” In another letter, Porter captured the qualities in Abels that suited her to the job of editor and that would serve her well as an agent: “You have snatched me out of more fires than I can count on at this time, but I don’t need to count them—I just remember the grand noble sum of your goodness, and thank you with all my heart.” Porter finds yet another occasion to elucidate the unusual qualities she praises in her friend: “Blessed angel,” she writes,

all my thanks again, and for always, for everything—where does your goodness and your marvelous effectiveness end, I wonder? Did it ever? When you set out to help somebody, you can really make it stick—and that is a gift! It goes with a certain moral power which you use so tactfully one would hardly ever want to call it that: but I have said and mean it that moral power is the only kind I respect and would like to have, and you have it. Bless you forever.

Here Porter is expressing gratitude for a personal loan from Abels, a loan that she is eager to pay back. She is also grateful to be receiving a check from *Mademoiselle.* Abels occasionally made personal loans to Porter when her friend was in desperate circumstances; her willingness to do so touched Porter deeply.

Porter’s letters to Abels extend beyond praise of her friend’s personal qualities to recognition of Abels’s skill as a businesswoman. Abels referred frequently to her client

---

29 KAP to Cyrilly Abels, September 16, 1953, KAP Papers.
30 KAP to Cyrilly Abels, January 8, 1956, KAP Papers.
31 KAP to Cyrilly Abels, March 10, 1958, KAP Papers.
as a "genius," but Porter also goes out of her way to express admiration for Abels’s professional prowess. She says, for instance, that as far as she and her friends are concerned Abels is the "Editor" of the magazine, meaning the "sole editor," without even assistants, she says, "[f]irst all by your lone."32 When Abels left the security of a fixed editorial position to build her own clientele as an agent, Porter admires her friend’s determination and resourcefulness. "It is wonderful, what you have done in this short year," she writes in June of 1963:

When one thinks of the way you launched your little canoe into the most treacherous sea there is, and now have a ketch at least and soon an auxiliary engine, and I’ll bet an ocean-going yacht before your finished! – for your entire style points that way. One thing, angel, you get at once the confidence of people – it is a mysterious faculty and you have it, not by intention but by being. No method, no technique, just you, breathing pure human goodness on higher ground than most people can understand or believe in. . . . [t]he writers who have you for an agent are lucky. I don’t forget that I am one of them.33

In a letter to Abels from Italy, Porter expands upon the theme of her admiration for the transition Abels has made from editor to independent literary agent: "When I think of your courage, going into what must be one of the fiercest fields in the world, you of all people, I am impressed and somewhat humbled in my own esteem, because I have always thought I had courage for anything or nearly, but actually I never tackled anything as complicated and dangerous as your new profession."34 Clearly, both Porter and Abels drew strength from the example of the other’s achievements. In particular, Porter was impressed that someone with Cyrilly’s mild and generous nature could be tough enough to navigate confidently “one of the fiercest fields in the world.”

---

32 KAP to Cyrilly Abels, March 10, 1958, KAP Papers.
33 KAP to Cyrilly Abels, June 15, 1963, KAP Papers.
34 KAP to Cyrilly Abels, January 20, 1963, KAP Papers.
Abels and Porter also identified with one another as very feminine women negotiating their careers within male-centered literary circles. Abels's business sense and tenacity were assets in her transition from magazine editor to independent agent.35 She confided to Porter, however, that at times her gentleness interfered with being taken seriously. She admitted that some people got the wrong impression of her. "[J]ust because I'm gentle, she explained, "doesn't mean I can't be firm when I think I'm right."36 Indeed, Abels was capable of defending her interests and those of her clients. A year later, Abels proudly reported that she had "earned the reputation of being tough," which, she said, is exactly what she wanted.37

Porter, on the other hand, reveals why she would have benefited from an effective agent all along. "Yes," she agrees,

certain people are very apt to make the same mistake about you that they do about me--that because you are good mannered and amiable you are soft. I could have told them better any time at all in the past ten years, but they wouldn't listen to me, either: I don't shout and hit them over the head usually until it's too late to do any good.38

Here Porter diagnoses her problems with handling her own business affairs accurately. Her alliances with editors and publishers make clear that she did not go on the offensive to defend herself until she had discovered, too late, that her publishers had not in fact protected her interests in the ways she had naively expected that they would.

35 Abels updates her progress as an agent in a letter to Porter: "But I am breaking even, Katherine Anne (i.e. my rent and phone bills are paid for out of what I'm making), and all the old-hands in the business said I wouldn't do that for three years! So I guess that's good. And now I have 26 clients, having turned away exactly the same number in the five months since I've opened the office" (Cyrilly Abels to KAP, February 14, 1963, KAP Papers). In another letter to Porter, Abels explained that her newest client was Martha Gellhorn, "who tells me that I've done more for her in a few weeks than her previous agent did for her in six years" (Cyrilly Abels to KAP, June 12, 1963, KAP Papers).
36 Cyrilly Abels to KAP, December 10, 1962, KAP Papers.
37 Cyrilly Abels to KAP, February 14, 1963, KAP Papers.
38 KAP to Cyrilly Abels, December 12, 1962, KAP Papers.
Porter’s decision to retain Abels in 1962 meant that for the first time she seriously embraced the services of an agent. Her decision to work with Abels violated her own publishing philosophy, described succinctly in a letter to her literary friend, James F. Powers six years earlier: “Don’t have a literary agent,” she warns,

You can do everything by yourself and no doubt better than any one could have done it for you. . . . I have none and never had; I think it much better to make your arrangements with each editor on each story; they feel nearer to you and get a personal interest in what you are doing. Agents seem somehow not quite human. . . . I have one for moving pictures etc . . . and much good he has done me!39

Here we see Porter’s bias toward cultivating direct and personal relationships with editors; using an intermediary, she implies, is cold and counterproductive.

It is a bitter irony that Abels’s services as an agent came too late in the writer’s career to influence significantly the ingrained patterns she had developed for handling, or perhaps more aptly mishandling, her professional affairs. Although Abels felt privileged to have Porter as her client, the truth is that in taking on Porter she developed an even deeper attachment to a writer who had been damaged by a long history of trying to manage her business career without the necessary knowledge or protection. Porter was scarred, even terribly embittered, from her experiences working closely and directly with her publishers over the years. Yet as much as Porter perhaps wanted to change her ways of thinking about her editors and publishers, and as much as Abels would try to influence her friend, actually doing so was another matter completely. Old habits and attitudes were ingrained. Abels would nevertheless do her best to protect and advise her friend and client from 1962 until her death in 1975.

39 KAP to James F. Powers, July 20, 1956, KAP Papers, in Bayley 512.
Given the way Porter’s frustration with Harcourt, Brace’s handling of her affairs had culminated so bitterly in the 1950s, it is surprising that Porter chose to eschew agents until one of her closest friends became one. Porter’s letters to employees at Harcourt, Brace during the early 1950s document the writer’s growing conviction that Donald Brace had failed to protect her interests. Whether it was frustration over her stories not being sold to Hollywood or impatience regarding Harcourt, Brace’s lax attitude toward finding ways to reprint her stories in foreign countries, Porter had discovered over time that Donald Brace had not been committed to keeping his word that his firm would do everything in its power to protect Porter’s professional interests as an agent might have. The writer’s experiences with the firm provided her with a textbook example as to why she needed outside representation, but Porter continued to believe that she was better off negotiating directly with editors and publishers.

In her resistance to agents, Porter aligned herself with the beliefs held by the conservative publisher, Henry Holt. Holt resented deeply the implication that authors needed agents in order to evade publishers who were sharp, dishonest, and ready to “trick and cheat the author at every safe opportunity” by inserting unfavorable clauses “calculated to catch the unwary” author.\(^{40}\) Holt’s resentment was understandable. As Mary Ann Giles explains, agents undermined publishers’ authority by forcing them to expose their activities to public scrutiny—public in the sense of authors and agents. Agents helped authors to empower themselves by assisting them in their fights for better financial terms and more control over their literary property. And agents garnered power for themselves by creating a service on which both authors and publishers eventually

---


Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
came to depend. The extent of this subtle influence can be found in the virulence of the responses from the party who had most to lose, the publisher.\footnote{Mary Ann Gillies, “A.P. Watt, Literary Agent,” \textit{Publishing Research Quarterly}, Vol. 9, Issue 1 (1993): 20; also see Thomas L. Bonn, “Henry Holt A-Spinning in His Grave: Literary Agenting Yesterday and Today,” \textit{Publishing Research Quarterly}, Vol. 10, Issue 1 (1994): 55.} Publishers like Henry Holt—who yearned for the days before agents intervened in relations between authors and publishers—argued that the interests of the publisher were identical to the interests of the author.\footnote{West III 85.} From the late nineteenth-century onward, however, authors had demonstrated that they disagreed with this assessment. Instead of leaving their fates in the hands of publishers, many authors sought out the services of agents who promised to protect writers from signing unfavorable contracts. Porter was old-fashioned in her desire to align herself directly with publishers; the days when it was considered “good form for the author to know little or nothing” about contracts and market rates had long passed.\footnote{Brown 357.}

In her next alliance with Seymour Lawrence and Atlantic-Little, Brown, Porter chose once again to trust her editor with protecting her interests. The writer was misguided and naïve when she allowed herself to believe that she knew enough about contracts and publishing to ensure that she would never run into future conflicts with her new publishers. Her insistence that she would not sign any contracts unless they agreed to her particular demands—which included clauses that forbade her publishers from remaindering her books or from letting them go out of print during her lifetime—did not mean that she was capable of discerning other potential pitfalls in the contracts she signed.
Porter would have been wise to have listened to some of the agents, including Raymond Everitt and Diramuid Russell, who had courted her over the years. Russell and Everitt had both conveyed to Porter what pioneering agent Spencer Curtis Brown articulated in a 1905 essay published in the *Fortnightly Review*. Brown explains:

> Even suppose we waive the contention frequently made, that the great creative genius generally lacks correspondingly great executive ability, the fact remains that the author's work is to write; he cannot in justice to himself spend the time necessary to gain the business knowledge and experience of the man whose work is to buy and sell.\(^4\)

By the time Porter's writing career was launched, literary agents were well established and respectable, and writers could easily find agents who would not seek to disrupt the sanctity of the author-publisher relationship. Instead, agents including Russell and Everitt promised to handle their clients' business negotiations while leaving authors and editors free to discuss editorial matters.\(^5\) But as we have seen in previous chapters, Porter was drawn to her editors and publishers for reasons that were deeply personal; she wanted to establish strong psychological ties with her editors, believing somehow that only they could provide her with the constancy, support, and assurances that she required.

Porter aligned herself with publishers who wanted to work with her directly and without the interference of an intermediary, but she did so at her peril. Once Porter's relationships with her publishers turned sour, the writer became frantic about regaining

---

\(^4\) Brown 357.

\(^5\) While publishers like Henry Holt were skeptical about the intentions of agents, Spencer Curtis Brown understood early on that agents should when possible avoid interfering with the bonds between author and publisher. Curtis Brown founded one of the first literary agencies, Curtis Brown, Ltd., the same firm that Raymond Everitt went to work for after leaving his editorial position at Harcourt, Brace. Brown describes his philosophy regarding the role of the agent this way: "The wise literary agent of to-day [sic] and of the future will act for the author on a policy of competition, it is true, but competition carefully tempered by regard for the value of friendly relations between author and publisher. The best arrangement between author and publisher is the one of closest touch on the literary side of the work, leaving the commercial side to be arranged between publisher and agent, on the basis of the value of the author's work in the open market" (Brown 358).
control over the rights she had relinquished, and the quest for reestablishing some kind of control over her business affairs became paramount. When Abels became Porter’s agent in 1962, the writer looked to her friend as someone who would help her to regain control over her published writings to the extent that this was possible. Unfortunately, Abels’s transition from editor to agent came too late to influence significantly Porter’s writing life.

Porter’s publishers controlled the rights to her published writings, rights an agent might have protected. Harcourt, Brace, for instance, controlled the rights to all of her books of short stories. Porter had been furious when the firm refused to sell the rights to these stories, the crown jewels of her publishing career, to her new publishers at Atlantic-Little, Brown. In 1955 when Porter signed with Atlantic-Little, Brown, Seymour Lawrence was eager to collect all of the stories and to publish them in paperback. Porter had long believed that collecting her stories into a paperback edition would significantly enlarge her reading audience. She was thrilled with Lawrence’s ambition to carry through finally on something that she believed should have been done long ago. Yet her attempts to influence the officers at Harcourt, Brace were fruitless; she should have known from experience that Harcourt, Brace would cling to the stories that they had so proudly published under their imprint.

On occasion, Porter wrote letters to employees at Harcourt, Brace expressing her dismay at their determination never to relinquish control over her books. She made clear in these letters that she viewed their policy as unwarranted and unduly covetous. In 1962, Porter received a response from the president of Harcourt, Brace, William Jovanovich, in which the publisher intended to silence Porter’s complaints. Jovanovich
chastised Porter, informing her that he had no intention of selling rights to titles that his firm continued to control. He explained that the “success of Ship of Fools, on which I congratulate you, does not, I think, obviate the courtesy and loyalty Harcourt, Brace gave to you over several decades.”\(^46\) While Porter had gained certain advantages from working directly with her publishers when things were going well, when her relations turned sour she found herself time after time in vulnerable and powerless situations wherein she was unable to address effectively her grievances, whether they were warranted and reasonable, or not.

Porter never understood clearly what her rights were or how she might have handled things differently. She was therefore at the mercy of the logic her publishers used in their correspondence with her. The writer’s outbursts of anger were often unseemly and contributed to her reputation as a difficult author. Without the representation of an agent to prevent or handle these kinds of draining disagreements, the pattern of author-publisher tensions would reemerge years later when the writer was forced to confront the mistakes that she had made in her direct and personal negotiations with Seymour Lawrence and Atlantic-Little, Brown.

In view of the many ways that Seymour Lawrence acted as Porter’s protector and advocate, it is certainly understandable why Porter trusted him as one might trust an agent. In his seemingly independent position as director of the *Atlantic Monthly Press*, Lawrence in some ways masqueraded as an agent, as someone who would buffer and protect Porter in her negotiations with Little, Brown. Lawrence played wonderfully in the role of Porter’s personal advocate; he even distinguished himself from his employers by positioning himself as someone who was more ethical and less mercenary than the

\(^{46}\) Bill Jovanovich to KAP, May 22, 1962, KAP Papers.
publishers with whom he was associated. But ultimately, Lawrence was not Porter’s agent. He worked for Atlantic-Little, Brown and, as much as he was devoted to Porter personally, his loyalties were necessarily directed toward his employers first. Therefore, unlike an agent who might have scrutinized the contracts that Porter signed with an eye to her interests, Lawrence was only doing his job when he allowed the writer to sign contracts that were favorable to his employers. It was simply not his province to peruse contracts looking for clauses that years later might be regarded as limiting or stifling to the writer.

There is little doubt that the representation of an agent would have made an important difference to Porter during the years she published with Atlantic-Little, Brown. A competent agent would have helped to avert many of the grievances and frustrations that Porter felt after the publication of *Ship of Fools*. There is no reason, for instance, to believe that Porter should have been limited to a $30,000 a year salary cap on her earnings, and Porter’s frustration about not receiving more of the fortune that her book had earned was legitimate. 47 One cannot speculate exactly how an agent might have negotiated with Atlantic-Little, Brown, but it seems likely that an agent would have understood tax laws and been able to negotiate more advantageous financial terms on Porter’s behalf.

In addition, while one might imagine Porter as having finally earned respect and gratitude from her publishers, their treatment of her when she asked to be released from her obligations to the firm was insensitive. When Porter declared her intention to leave Little, Brown in 1964 to follow Seymour Lawrence, she was first told that she would be afforded a gracious departure. When she did decide to leave, however, she was told that

---

47 See Seymour Lawrence to KAP, August 24, 1962, SL Papers.
her contracts were of value to the stockholders and were more important than any sentimental wish she had to follow an editor to whom she was devoted.\textsuperscript{48} When the officers at Little, Brown did not bother to hide their opinion of her as an asset, they repeated William Jovanovich’s similar transgression upon her departure from Harcourt, Brace, and, once again, Porter’s sensibilities were deeply offended; her opinion of publishers was badly tainted. The contingency clause insisted upon by the officers at Little, Brown, moreover, was certainly not in the tradition of the gentleman publisher.\textsuperscript{49} Max Perkins and the House of Scribner would never have caused grief to a writer who begged release. Even Thomas Wolfe, one of the house’s most valued authors, was allowed to depart without resistance when he declared his intention to find a new publisher.\textsuperscript{50} If Porter was expecting her publishers to behave in the tradition of the gentleman publisher, she was setting herself up to be disappointed and disillusioned; she was also showing that she was out of step with the realities of modern publishing.

The consequences of Porter’s adherence to an outdated publishing paradigm grounded in the nineteenth-century ideals of the gentleman publisher were such that every time the writer encountered the harsh realities of a competitive business rather than industry’s human face, she became enraged and plunged into emotional turmoil. Every disenchanted experience that she had with her publishers added more fuel to her ever-growing antipathy toward an industry she increasingly regarded as crass and inhumane. The tragedy for Porter was that her opinions were not merely intellectual but deeply

\textsuperscript{48} See KAP to Seymour Lawrence, June 21, 1964, KAP Papers; Mr. Thornhill to KAP, July 8, 1964, KAP Papers.
\textsuperscript{49} See KAP to Seymour Lawrence, August 28, 1964, KAP Papers.
\textsuperscript{50} In his memoir written about the House of Scribner, published on the firm’s hundredth anniversary, Roger Burlingame says that Scribner editors often surprised authors who wished to depart by wishing them “Godspeed.” He quotes a letter of release from a Scribner editor to a Scribner author: “But you will please understand that we make no claim upon you, and I sincerely wish you to do what you believe to be in your best interests. Whatever you do will be accepted by me in good spirit” (Burlingame 30).
emotional. Her inability to find a way to distance the business part of her life from her inner artistic life caused her substantial inner turmoil and lost productivity. Her ingrained pattern of bringing her publishers into her inner social circle and inner emotional life meant that she had tremendous difficulty separating the practice of her art from the daily nuisances and difficulties of managing her day-to-day business affairs, affairs that without an agent had become an enormously time-consuming and emotionally draining preoccupation.

When Abels became Porter’s agent, the writer was ready to have an advocate willing to help her salvage whatever rights she had left to her published writings. The process of explaining to Abels about the rights that she felt had been stolen from her over the years was cathartic, even if the efforts that Abels later made upon her behalf would at this late stage in the writer’s career be largely symbolic. Abels did perform many useful functions for Porter, but she could not reverse the mistakes that her client had made during the past thirty-two years.

Porter understood that Abels would have to make the best of a bad situation, and she began immediately to inform her friend about which rights to her works she had lost and why. In a postcard to Abels written in 1962, Porter informally accepted Abels’s offer to be her agent “for, above all, my stories to Hollywood.” She then warned her friend that she must deal first of course with the owner of my first three books—they abandoned The Days Before to the bargain bins of 4th avenue, but I have all rights now in that book, though when I get out another book of occasional writings, I have promised it to Atlantic. Years ago when I was considerably more ignorant and trusting than I am now, Donald Brace persuaded me to sign a contract making his firm also my agent, with their share of any moving picture sale or rights 25%!!! I can almost hear you scream even at this distance, but so it is, and so it remains for that set of books. But they handsomely agree to pay any agent that negotiates a sale for
them the regular fee. I suppose legally and by business standards this is merely
sharp practise [sic], but I believe it is criminal. However, I can do nothing about
the income tax law that prevents me from having any but the smallest share of my
money, and the publisher has use of it to invest as he pleases. No wonder
publishers haven’t protested against this odd law that would take 91 percent of
this first money I ever made from my writing! But well, let’s go on as well as we
can in this situation.51

Not surprisingly, the theme of this postcard is the various ways Porter blamed publishers
for their self-interested methods of conducting business. She openly acknowledged that
Brace took advantage of her trusting nature and ignorance when he convinced her to
make Harcourt, Brace her agent. She also deems the percentages Harcourt, Brace
demanded for profits on the sale of one of her stories to Hollywood as “criminal.” But
she does not stop there. Her last reference is to the law that prevented her from receiving
more of the income earned from *Ship of Fools*. When speaking openly and honestly to
Abels, Porter acknowledged that she has buried her innocence and idealism with regard
to publishers and their motives.

In Abels, Porter found an advocate who at every turn protected her interests
fiercely. Abels, for instance, agreed with Porter that Harcourt, Brace’s policy of taking
twenty-five-percent of her profits from the moving pictures was “antediluvian.”52 She
negotiated with Harcourt, Brace and began immediately to market to Hollywood
executives a few short stories and the essay, “A Defense of Circe,” which Porter felt
might be made into an amusing dramatic comedy.53 Abels assumed that Porter would

51 KAP to Cyril Abels, undated postcard, KAP Papers.
52 Cyril Abels to KAP, September 2, 1966, KAP Papers.
53 In a letter to Jack Phelps, a man interested in the stage rights to one of Porter’s stories, Abels explained
her arrangement with Harcourt, Brace: “In order to avoid confusion and overlapping, Harcourt, Brace &
World has now made me their representative for the sale of dramatic rights to Miss Porter’s short stories
(so that Harcourt would not be selling the same story to one company while I, representing Miss Porter,
was selling it to another). As you know, dramatic rights means (and Harcourt spells it out in their letter to
me) TV, motion picture, and stage rights. Harcourt, in other words, has empowered me to sell all three:
have no problem selling one of her stories to Hollywood since in 1962 her client was at the top of the best-seller list, and *Ship of Fools* had recently been sold for $400,000 to Stanley Kramer. Abels soon discovered that Porter’s short stories were not the kind of material movie companies were considering. Hollywood executives, according to Abels, were “so slow, so cautious, so unimaginative.”

While Abels was not ultimately successful in selling the stories, Porter learned in the process that her agent would not let any publisher, including Seymour Lawrence, infringe upon her rights. Like Porter, Abels viewed publishers with suspicion, and indeed her correspondence with Seymour Lawrence shows that publishers likewise were cautious in their communications with agents. When confusion arose over who controlled the motion picture rights to the story, “Holiday,” published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1960, for instance, Abels defended Porter against Seymour Lawrence, who was representing Atlantic-Little, Brown’s claim to own the rights to the story. While Porter was telling Abels that she had retained the rights to “Holiday,” Lawrence and his colleagues had a different understanding of the matter. Lawrence cautioned Abels from proceeding with any attempts to sell the story, telling her that he had discussed this with “Randy Williams [of Little, Brown] who feels that until we actually straighten out what stories are available, no action should be taken and that you, acting as her agent for motion picture and dramatic rights, ought to proceed with extreme caution.”

---

Miss Porter, however, has authorized me to sell only her short stories (and articles) to the motion pictures” (Cyrilly Abels to Jack Phelps, December 18, 1962, KAP Papers).

54 Ned Brown of General Artists Corporation informed Abels that “Katherine Anne writes as beautifully as ever, but the short story, ‘Holiday’ is not, as I say, motion picture material” (Ned Brown to Cyrilly Abels, January 4, 1963, KAP Papers); Cyrilly Abels to KAP, June 12, 1963.

55 Seymour Lawrence to Cyrilly Abels, November 21, 1962, KAP Papers.
Abels acknowledged to Porter that her response to Lawrence was “tough,” even “fresh.” She said that she thought her tone was justified because “Sam, like every other publisher, is sharp and needs a firm hand.” In her letter to Lawrence, Abels made clear that it was Lawrence, not Katherine Anne, who was confused about who owned the rights to “Holiday.” She informed Lawrence that Porter had advised her “twice in writing and once viva voce” that she was to sell the motion picture rights to the story.56

Abels prevailed in this dispute, probably because Lawrence did not want to upset Porter. Abels’s efforts to defend Porter’s interests in this matter, while it may seem like a minor point, were central to the writer’s ambition to retain as much control over her literary property as possible. In a letter to Abels, Porter explained that, while she may have lost the rights to her books, she still retained the rights to the pieces she had published in magazines. This was true as well with the occasional writings included in The Days Before, since she had reclaimed the rights to this book from Harcourt, Brace. Porter therefore proudly retained the rights to pieces including “A Defense of Circe,” “Saint Augustine and the Bullfight,” and “Holiday,” a short story that had not yet been published in a book.57

In a letter written from Rome, Porter emphasized to her agent that the issue of retaining her rights and controls was paramount. In her mind, owning the rights to some of her writings had become her only defense against the policies of greedy publishers; any piece of writing that she rather than her publishers owned represented one more symbolic victory in her quest to regain, however modestly, the sense of control that she had over the years relinquished to her publishers. She explains to Abels:

56 Cyrilly Abels to Seymour Lawrence, November 23, 1962, KAP Papers.
57 See KAP to Cyrilly Abels, December 13, 1962, KAP Papers; KAP to Cyrilly Abels, undated postcard, KAP Papers.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
EVERYTHING that has not yet been contracted for by Little, Brown,--Atlantic Monthly Press, except for my first three books owned by Harcourt Brace and World, as they have become, belongs to me; and I am going to take pains to see that they go on being my property, and I expect to add to this little backlog as I go; it has become a matter of life and death and of personal self-respect, that I do not allow everybody who touches my work to tie me hand and foot for life, and afterwards, so far as I can see. . . .”

For Porter, having an agent and trying to retain the rights to her literary property represented no less than a battle to retain her self-respect as an artist. No artist, in her view, should be “tied hand and foot for life,” yet this was the price that publishers had extracted from her over the years. Despite her frustration and resentment, however, Porter never resisted these alliances but instead had nurtured and encouraged them. Her conflicted attitude toward her publishers represents a contradiction that defines her publishing relationships. A clear understanding of these contradictions illuminates why the writer’s alliances with editors and publishers were marked by sentiments ranging from fierce loyalty and dependence to resentment and rage.

Abels, far from creating conflicts and tensions in the writer’s life, instead was willing to do whatever she could to make Porter’s life easier and that included availing Porter of opportunities to make money. After the publication of Ship of Fools, Porter’s value in the marketplace had increased dramatically, and Abels was ready to exploit these opportunities, if Porter could muster the energy to write. Abels, for instance, informed Porter that

everyone wants something by you: the POST (SATURDAY EVENING) has asked; so has McCall’s. . . . everyone. Sam, naturally enough, wants to keep you for the ATLANTIC, but as you say there are better markets, and better paying ones. I think you would get at least $5,000 for a story—and probably for an

58 KAP to Cyrilly Abels, December 13, 1962, KAP Papers.
article too; if we had it ready, we'd try for more. . . . But how can you write when you’re so harassed. Maybe, as you say, in Spain.59

Here we see Abels encouraging distance between Porter and Lawrence, not for the first time. She finds it necessary to emphasize that loyalty toward Lawrence and the Atlantic Monthly is not necessary, especially when her client had earned the privilege of requesting higher fees from other magazines.

When Abels became Porter’s agent, she did much more than to look out for her friend financially. During the months following the publication of Ship of Fools and before Porter escaped the rounds of publicity before leaving for Europe, Abels offered to help Porter with anything she might need. In October of 1962, for example, Abels wrote that she wished she could be “right there to try to relieve some of the pressures of the packing, chores, details, details,” and then reiterated that she would be “delighted” to take care of “anything that would relieve you!”60 In other letters, she repeated her offers, making clear that she was available to help her friend with anything that was making her life difficult.

Abels was particularly helpful to Porter during the difficult and emotionally draining years after Lawrence departed from Atlantic-Little, Brown in 1964. While Lawrence’s career was in transition, Porter had to decide whether or not she should follow her editor as he tried to reestablish his career first at Alfred A. Knopf and then as he embarked upon becoming an independent publisher in connection with Dell Press. Throughout this difficult period, Abels advised Porter and supported her in the decisions that she made. In addition, she also encouraged her not to strain herself socially and to

59 Cyrilly Abels to KAP, June 21, 1963, KAP Papers.
60 Cyrilly Abels to KAP, October 20, 1962, KAP Papers.
write only for "love and pastime." Any time Porter felt burdened with deadlines, financial difficulties, or ill health, Abels was there to handle some of her client's prickly negotiations and communications or to offer a soothing word.

As time went on, Porter relied upon Abels more and more, at one point telling her agent that she could sell "anything of mine, where you like, but they [Harcourt, Brace] can't." Porter clearly trusted Abels in ways that she would never trust publishers again. Abels thus created for herself a special place in the heart of a writer who had spent the most vital years of her writing life contracted to publishers who had demanded from her the things she had come to deplore the most: "contracts, advances, deadlines, and all those benumbing things that take the life out of writing a book."

During the last years of their association as author and agent, Abels continued to help Porter to negotiate her way through awkward situations, including the writer's decision to terminate a project, overseen by Abels and Lawrence, to publish Porter's correspondence with Glenway Wescott. Abels also met with Lawrence in 1972 when Porter sought to break with Seymour Lawrence, Inc., and Dell Publishers. Abels explained to Lawrence that, while there were no hard feelings, Porter simply was not happy with the way that Dell Press had handled her books. Lawrence, in turn, told Abels that he "wouldn't try to hold an author who didn't want to stay with him." Abels handled both of these awkward situations while grieving for the recent death of her beloved husband, Jerome Weinstein. Difficult personal circumstances never interfered with her dedication to helping Porter whenever and however she was needed.

---

61 Cyrilly Abels to KAP, November 10, 1964, KAP Papers; Cyrilly Abels to KAP, June 2, 1965, KAP Papers.
63 KAP to Hilda (at HBCO), June 25, 1972, KAP Papers.
64 Cyrilly Abels to KAP, September 22, 1972, KAP Papers.
During the mid-1970s when Porter was struggling with ill health and for the most part unable to write, she would share with her agent how she was feeling about her attempts to continue writing. She described her work on her Sacco-Vanzetti book (published in 1977 as *The Never-Ending Wrong*) as “absolutely necessary for my peace of mind, and survival of self-respect as an artist.” On another occasion, she declared that she had made up her mind to “write again in spite of hell.”

In this same letter, she continued on in a different vein, once again finding a way to convey her admiration for her friend while sharing her musings about the afterlife. She imagines a place that she had named Fiddler’s Green, where she hopes to reunite with all of her friends once they have passed from this world. The writer’s vision of living in a place full of nature’s bounty recalls all of the letters that she had written to Cyrilly in the past, wherein she had vividly described their mutual love of birds, gardening, and various blooming flowers. “There is not quite as much hell as there was,” she writes,

and I have a great prospect of emerging out at least as far as Fiddler’s Green, which is the best I had ever hoped for anyhow after my earthly life. I have been trying to make engagements with my friends to meet me there and I have several; I do take them as they come and I now invite you to join me, too—I have a feeling that Fiddler’s Green is about all I am going to be able to take of eternal bliss and in case you hesitate, I will describe it to you. It is an immense, probably endless green meadow full of each beautiful tree and flower and fruit and bird and animal that we have ever known and loved in this world, only the lions and tigers and wolves don’t bite and there are no snakes. And there are gathered all the lucky souls who were not bad enough for hell and not quite good enough for heaven and so Divine Providence decided not to waste time putting them in purgatory as it wasn’t going to make any great difference and set aside this endless lovely kind of vacation land for I hope such as I and a great many of my friends. Darling, never think that I don’t think Paradise is your just desert [sic] but wouldn’t you be lonely there? Go on being an angel on earth and then be an angel in Fiddler’s Green with all of the imperfect beings who love you.66

---

65 KAP to Cyrilly Abels, typed by assistant “gw,” August 27, 1975, KAP Papers.
66 KAP to Cyrilly Abels, typed by “gw,” May 29, 1975, KAP Papers.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Porter’s vision of the afterlife is telling. Even Porter’s beloved lions and tigers (Porter loved all cats) are rendered incapable of inflicting harm. It is a world in which the gentler aspects of life and nature prevail, a world as far removed from the hurly-burly of business and competition as one might imagine. Porter’s vision of the afterlife, then, is an escape from the harsher aspects of life that she wanted to leave behind; her years of struggling with the publishers who had transformed love of craft into a competitive and anxious struggle were aspects of the living world that she purged firmly from the heavenly world of her imagination.

In saying goodbye to Abels a month later when her friend was struggling painfully with cancer, Porter makes clear that her friend does not and has never belonged to the world, at least not in the way that most “imperfect beings” have. Abels, in her eyes, had always been angelic and above the fray. Porter conveys with complete honesty and openness the degree to which Cyrilly has influenced profoundly her life: “I want to say to you what I have always felt and loved about you,” she writes,

and that is the incredible strength and beauty of your whole life as I have known it, your real understanding of love and somehow a depth of meaning which you surmised in human relationships, your genius for friendship and understanding of even the most complicated and hidden motives and sufferings and joys of the human beings near you. You are and have been a kind of exemplar of everything loving and admirable to your friends that I have known all these years, and I simply want to say to you now what I have felt about you and learned about love and a way of living from you all this time.67

Abels, short of breath, responds to her friend in a short note. She weeps when trying to explain what Porter has meant to her. She stops “before any more tears fall.”68

67 KAP to Cyrilly Abels, typed by “gw,” October 22, 1975, KAP Papers.
68 Cyrilly Abels to KAP, October 31, 1975, KAP Papers.
Cyrilly Abels created a place in Porter’s professional life that remained uninfected by conflict and strain. Despite the ways that Abels was a healing influence in the writer's professional and personal life, Porter could not purge completely another literary alliance that, despite the bitterness of its associations, she could never renounce completely. Perhaps in spite of herself, at the age of eighty-eight Porter remembered and called upon once more the man whom she had rejected with such ferocity, Seymour Lawrence. Porter begins by acknowledging that Lawrence “may think this is a strange kind of letter to write” without warning. She says she is in a “predicament” and “needs a little time to talk.” “I would give anything in the world to see you come here to see me,” she says.

Even two days would be enough. It would take a lot of frankness and a remembrance of our friendship. I have the most fantastical story I have ever heard or tried to put on paper. I need terribly to tell you these things. In any case, let me hear from you! In the meantime, dear friend, I am enchanted with Tillie Olsen’s Silences. It is the most marvelous collection of the kinds of silences which artists carry on, and finally become louder than any silence. I loved and enjoyed it. I am going to write her at once. I remember always the trouble she had in her life, and the wonderful way she conquered every adversity.

Toward the end of her life Porter once again needed her editor and publisher. Although by this time Porter had suffered strokes and her mind was clearly drifting, her sense of urgency and need is unmistakable. Porter clearly feels a yearning to reach out, to make a gesture of healing and reconciliation. Her impulse to do so is a testament to just how deeply she had relied upon and bonded with the professionals who had, for better or for worse, exercised so much influence and control over her creative journey. For however much Porter believed that artists should be able to practice their vocations unhindered by obligations and commitments, it was neither practical nor in her nature to live her life as an artist with carefree abandon.

---

69 KAP to Seymour Lawrence, dictated to a friend who wrote the letter in cursive (Bill Wilkins?), August 28, 1978, KAP Papers.
While Porter exercised a degree of control over her romantic life and after a series of failed marriages chose to live unattached, she managed her publishing alliances and her practical affairs poorly. Whatever the personal rewards Porter demanded and received from the intimate friendships she cultivated with her editors and publishers, these alliances did not come without exacting a personal cost. Porter's publishers demanded a novel, and Seymour Lawrence ultimately extracted that novel from his client. *Ship of Fools*, a creative project that dominated years of the writer's life, was completed neither easily nor freely but rather painfully and under duress.

Cyrilly Abels, with her tremendous kindness and her unselfish intentions, was the only professional who never pressured Porter and who truly and for many years was her friend. She provided an oasis of support and trust for the writer, and she was a blessed companion during an arduous, albeit at times triumphant, creative journey. Even with Cyrilly's friendship and support, however, Porter for most of her writing life still needed to maintain intense bonds with her editors. For all of Porter's independence as a woman and as an artist, the writer's alliances with her editors and publishers were ones that she sought, clung to fiercely, rejected, even despised, but always, for reasons we can never truly know, needed in mysterious and profound ways. It is poetic that in her last letter to Lawrence Porter should mention Tillie Olsen's discussion of "the kinds of silences which artists carry on, and finally become louder than any silence."

Those who have loved to read Porter's fiction have mourned her creative silences, wondered about their cause, and imagined what might have been had the writer been able to channel more efficiently her impressive creative powers. Perhaps the mystery of these silences can in part be explained when we understand the at times rewarding but often
painful ways in which Porter confronted and negotiated the world of publishing. Porter experienced the publishing world as intimate, familial, and nurturing and also as competitive, results-oriented, and mercenary. The contradictions within this world made it difficult for the writer to navigate, as her inner world of imagination and creativity were profoundly at odds with the practical aspects of profits, losses, contracts, and deadlines. Ironically, the writer's unwillingness to distance herself from her editors and publishers encouraged her complete cooperation with them, so that she participated actively in her own artistic incarceration.

She experienced repeatedly the darkening of the inner light of her creative spirit, and these moments were unquestionably linked to the contractual obligations that she found so stifling, even crushing. Fortunately, Porter possessed an inner strength that resisted defeat. In her final letter to Seymour Lawrence, she emerges as an artist whose enthusiasm and love of craft have been sustained by virtue of a grit and determination that show through in her correspondence as often as do her expressions of defeat. In one of her last letters to Cyrilly Abels, Porter told her friend that "the only times I was really happy in life was when I was writing or working trying to write." Although her correspondence with her editors, publishers, and agent documents an often excruciating creative voyage, Porter was continually buoyed by her eternal hope that she would recapture those miraculous, fleeting moments when she quieted her internal demons, defied circumstance, and experienced writing as pure joy.
Bibliography

Manuscript Collections

Papers of Katherine Anne Porter, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.

Papers of Seymour Lawrence, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.

Papers of Cyrilly Abels, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.

Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Annenberg Rare Book & Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania.

Works by Porter Cited in Dissertation


Primary Works Cited


**Secondary Works Cited**


Alexandra Dare Subramanian

Born Alexandra Dare Michos on August 24, 1966 in Santa Monica, California. She attended Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut and graduated with a B.A. in History from Trinity College in 1988. Alexandra spent her junior year of college as a history student at St. Hilda’s College, Oxford. After college, she worked in Boston before enrolling as an American Studies doctoral student at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. She earned a master’s degree in American Studies from the College of William & Mary in 1995.