

I. What Makes Bakhtin's Polyphonic Poetics Questionable?

The Russian literature / linguistic critic Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895-1975) serves as the pioneer critic of the privileged position of the author. He “has become a critic for our time” and is “automatically associated with a number of key concepts in the study of literature” (Davis 29). Many of the postmodern notions, particularly Roland Barthes's “The Death of the Author” and Michel Foucault's “What is an Author,” subvert the notion of “author” in the traditional sense and make the term immediately problematic. Both of them agree that when the author is dead (has disappeared), or when the author becomes merely “a certain functional principle” to the “significations which fill a work” (Foucault 118), the text begins to appear more as a game of language. Even though Bakhtin had never uttered any phrase similar to “the death of the author,” he extensively pushed forward the concept that the novelist must abandon his / her domination over the character's discourse in order to enable the full blossoming of the character's ideology or consciousness. Such a concept, when pushed to the extreme, more or less encourages the reader to assume the role of “usurper” in that of the author who seeks to become the “principal producer of textual meaning” (Thornborrow and Wareing 212). This seems hazardous in the process of reading.

Bakhtin proposed the polyphonic poetics--an ideal mode of novelistic writing. Two key concepts concerning Bakhtin's polyphony are “dialogism” and “sociological poetics.” “Dialogism” is regarded by Bakhtin as inherent in the nature of human language. The discourse of the author and discourse of the hero are so dialogical in nature that their discourses do not fuse into a harmonious whole but are in an everlasting conflict, and crystallize into many. The author must allow sufficient freedom for the hero to create his pure authentic voice. The authorial speech distances itself from that of the hero and thus dialogizes with it to

enable a richer portrayal of the hero. In other words, the hero resists the author's consummation to emerge as a completed and weighted whole. With all the characters blooming in their diverse ideologies, the novel can be written in the mode of "polyphony" with its diversity of languages, or heteroglossia, deeply rooted in social life. In the idea of "sociological poetics" Bakhtin believes that all aesthetic knowledge has social significance. Discourse in art is also discourse in life (Bernard-Donals xiii). To Bakhtin, the composition of aesthetic language is strongly related to social structures; aesthetic objects are similarly uniquely formed social structures. The novel is a literary form of, "and embedded in, a society of diverse forms of speaking and writing. The many voices of the society are the resources on which the novel writer draws" (Bell and Gardiner 65). During the process of artistic creation, the author decides what consciousnesses or ideologies through what social discourses he wants to present. Literary language, characterized by stratification and heterogloss, is permeated with socio-ideology and socio-consciousness.

Bakhtin's theoretical author-hero assumptions, to some extents, help examine the delicacy and subtlety of the authorial discourse which influences the presentation as well as the experiences of the character. We cannot deny that the more the authorial discourse seeks to engage in a dialogue with the hero based on an equal position between the two, the richer the portrayal of the hero will be. Nevertheless, works of literature "are intentional acts," and they "do not come into being by accident" (Lodge 158). David Lodge, novelist and a major critic of Bakhtin, is especially repulsed by the statement of "the death of the author" whereby the theorist replaces the role of the author with that of a scripter. Lodge noted that he felt like saying rudely to Barthes: "I do feel a kind of parental responsibility for the novels I write, that the composition of them is, in an important sense, my past, that I do think, suffer, live for a book while it is in

process” (15). Vladimir Nabokov, examining the works of Anton Chekhov, noticed that the author sometimes does not realize consciously why he had put a certain sentence into the mind of a certain character. He implied that the author usually “hints the trait of character” (*Lectures on Russian Literature* 257) before the reader recognized it. Indeed, this quality of the great novelists “always modifies the effect of the evidence, and sometimes transforms it entirely” (Forster *Aspects of the Novel* 55) and no wonder Henry James always felt this “illustration of the beauty incumbent on the author” in which he compulsively “assists” a character to convey “his vision, his conception, [and] his interpretation” (Preface to *The Americans* 38). Bakhtin preaches the necessity of the author's release of power in order to present, ethically, the complete ideology of the hero. Nevertheless, his insistence implies an ignorance of the author's role because his concepts reveal that the author's function is only to show, to reveal, rather than to tell. His thoughts obviously contrast with those mentioned by Henry James, Vladimir Nabokov, David Lodge, Alain Robbe-Grillet, E.M. Forster and many other prestigious literary critics who observe that “the work remains, in every case, the best and the only possible expression of [the novelist's] enterprise” (Robbe-Grillet 13).

In order to point out the weaknesses of the polyphony, I intend to examine the novelistic language of the 20th century American female writer Katherine Anne Porter's (1890-1980) *Ship of Fools* (1962). Basically, the language of the novel is almost an ideal to that of Bakhtin's most desired mode of writing. The author's utterance appears occasionally, but remains a trivial part of the multifarious voices. As a result, the reader witnesses the confrontation and convergence of numerous diverse ideologies, unique perspectives and personal fields of vision established in a world of multi-voices. However, *Ship of Fools* has failed to be ranked by critics as a classic mostly because the novel is simply written in a record of passengers'

lives. To be more specific, literary technique, or what Nabokov acclaims the magical power of the novel that is definitely required in novel writing, has been put aside, while numerous trifling, even boring affairs in real life have become Porter's objects of description. I will first pinpoint the polyphonic features that characterize the language of *Ship of Fools* as they correspond to Bakhtin's linguistic traits and then analyze the authorial discourse in this novel which, most of the time, maintains an attitude of detachment and indifference. In the last part I will discuss the specific requirements of a novel in order to show that a painstaking record of social languages, like *Ship of Fools*, though celebrating the truth of confrontation by way of presenting multifarious human consciousnesses, nevertheless must fail to become an acclaimed literary work as it leaves out the literary techniques that are inevitably required in a serious work of art.

II. Polyphonic features of Katherine Anne Porter's *Ship of Fools*

Ship of Fools, which took Porter twenty years to finish, is the only long novel this prestigious short-story writer wrote. Generally this novel has received negative criticism from critics and has been regarded as a second-rate work—it was on the best-seller list but in no way can be called a classic. Most critics believe that what Porter does in this novel is to combine several episodes based on a real journey on a ship from Veracruz, Mexico to Bremerhaven, Germany in 1931 with her husband-to-be Eugene Pressly into a “mediocre work” (Walsh 205) which is loosely-organized, heavily-symbolic, and badly-characterized with a structure parallel to the course of the journey, making it too hackneyed to be a literary theme. In the Bakhtinian sense, *Ship of Fools* is a novel written in the polyphonic mode in which social heteroglossia has been truthfully presented and the spirit of confrontation and stratification has been celebrated. The characters, totally seventy-four, are introduced as multifarious consciousnesses particularly with discordant ideologies and clashing opinions and stratified further apart by endless

religious beliefs, moralistic values, various upbringings, patriotism, political ideas and many other minor elements. Put simply, the novel is like a reservoir of traits of human language as it reveals a variety of essential elements discussed by Bakhtin—stratifications, speech genres, reported speech, interior dialogue as an active interaction with the outward social language net, dialogism, and self-other relations. On the other hand, the authorial discourse is perceptible but insignificant and always gives opinions from a detached and indifferent stance. It appears to be the only one voice among the collectivity of voices. Such a novel, deliberately planned by the author to reproduce “live people ... the true human predicament” (*KAP: Conversations* 112) to the extreme utmost, unfortunately has failed to meet the standards of most critics who are prepared to see literary works as an outcome of serious moral art with a characterization not broad and superficial but well-drawn and deep that requires highly-developed literary techniques. In this sense there seems to be a contradiction between the artistic design of a fiction and the reproduction of social languages that is characteristic of a polyphonic novel.

A. Representing multifarious consciousnesses and ideologies

What *Ship of Fools* sketches is a “speech community” which includes passengers of different nationalities, occupations, ages, social backgrounds, and religions. The passengers have been described as an entity in part I, Embarkation, and other smaller scenes especially when they emerge as visitors to small islands. Besides these incidents, almost every named passenger has been given some opportunity to develop his / her individual language. The stratification of the passengers' languages does not stop at the public scenes but goes further into the cabin life, the hidden life, and the inner thoughts which enable the reader to completely perceive the motivation and the psychic condition of numerous passengers. As a result, diverse ideologies as well as various social

consciousnesses constitute the many facets of the novelistic language of *Ship of Fools*.

On the *Vera* we have passengers of various nationalities and those passengers speak differently from each other because of their different nationalities. The Germans unanimously reveal German biases and Germanisms—a general antipathy toward Jews, male chauvinism, a sense of racial superiority, and the treatment of other races as ragtag and bobtail. The German circle utters pretty much the same language in this respect. Herr Rieber and Fraulein Lizzi Spokenkieker talk about driving “all Jews out of Germany”¹; Frau Schmitt carelessly speaks the sentence: “Our beautiful German children were exposed to the pernicious foreign customs” (*SF* 107); the Huttens consider the Spanish dancing troupe as “debased creatures, real hoodlums who should never have been allowed to travel first class at all” (*SF* 79); Frau Rittersdorf is obsessed with the idea that “a German woman should not marry into a dark race, even if the candidate is of high Spanish blood, of the ruling caste, of sufficient wealth” (*SF* 34), and Captain Thiele cautions Schmitt “not to listen to the gossip and prejudices of foreigners, who naturally are anxious to put the worst possible light on anything at all done by a German” (*SF* 176).

Harry J. Mooney mentions that “The Germans on the *Vera* need to be approached collectively as well as individually” (57), and indeed, among these German passengers there are minor stratifications deviating one from the other. Those stratifications include those of sex, marital status of men / women, occupation, age, social status, educational background, personal experience, and even health. Members of the German circle utter different languages as it has been genuinely observed by Lizzi: “Frau Rittersdorf for all her airs and graces speaks a vile

¹Katherine Anne Porter, *Ship of Fools*. (Toronto: Little, Brown & Company, 1962), 212.

Hereafter, page numbers will be cited in the text with the abbreviation *SF*.

Münchener accent; the Captain speaks Berliner style, atrocious; the purser speaks Plattdeutsch, the worst of all except some of those sailors from up around Königsberg who talk like mere Baltic peasants” (*SF* 213-14). Under the influence of all those minor stratifications, each German expresses his / her distinct and unique worldviews in different discourses. The captain demonstrates a voice of top authority, Lizzi the seemingly frivolous girl exhibits priggish self-righteousness, Rieber the book publisher exposes a sense of pedantry that obviously parallels his outward behavior, Frau Schmitt the newly-widowed expresses timidity owing to her well-mannered temperament, Frau Rittersdorf the widow discloses an air of grace and self-confidence because of her frequent pleading for her dead husband, Herr Huttens manifests a mode of preaching publicly abstruse philosophical ideas on account of his ex-job as a principal, Frau Huttens mostly maintains silence because she is aware that her position is subordinate to her respectful husband's, and Herr Garf the dying religious enthusiast most of the time goes on about his gifted power in healing. The reader therefore witnesses the private stories, personal recollections, and the unknown past of those German passengers as well as the apathy and the antagonism they bear toward each other. In truth, *Ship of Fools* is a meticulous account of the diverse discourses of the *Vera* passengers and it is exactly such detailed, scrupulous linguistic description that successfully makes the discourse of the novel also the discourse of life.

The four Americans abroad, namely, a “fortyish, tippling lady” (Miller 154) Mrs. Treadwell, Denny, and a pair of artists, Jenny Brown and David Scott, who seem to be engaged in an everlasting argument about almost everything, have been given a somewhat different description compared with the Germans and the Spanish people. The four Americans are sketched individually rather than being portrayed collectively. Never once does the reader witness the four Americans gather together to devise a plan against the passengers of other nationalities, and never

once does the reader find they show real interest in each other's affairs. This reveals the more individualistic or even eccentric trait of Americans, who seem to lack a sense of racial union. Toward the ship's affairs these Americans exhibit different attitudes, mostly divergent because of their personal perspectives.

There are also six Cuban medical students, a newly married Mexican couple, eight-hundred and seventy-six workers in steerage, the Swiss hotel owners and merchants, two priests, La Condesa--a Spanish *déclassée* noble woman, a Mexican ambassador's wife, her Indian nurse, and a Jewish German Herr Lowenthal. With their autonomous discourses, they reveal diverse perspectives, fields of vision, worldviews and horizons, all to further stratify the language of the novel. Those passengers express conflicting and often derogatory opinions about the events happening on the ship. Toward the same issues, the passengers always utter multifarious viewpoints formed because of their diverse national, social, political, religious, occupational, educational, personal and even sexual consciousnesses. The language of *Ship of Fools* is stupendously stratified by those factors, tremendous in number, and in this sense, the novelistic language exhibits the very structure of the social language of real life since in real life situations language exists as an everlastingly stratified and closely intertwined network. The existence of these stratifications is undeniable, and they guarantee the multileveled, manifold, and multivalent nature of the novel's language.

B. Confrontations as essential elements of human languages

What Bakhtin designates as the most significant feature of social heteroglossia, namely, multiplicity and contradiction, can be found everywhere in this novel. It can even be put like this—multiplicity bespeaks the very spirit of the novel while contradiction partially sustains the novel as a polyphonic force. “Multiplicity” reveals the essential stratification of social languages and with its dynamics,

“stratification and heteroglossia widen and deepen as long as language is alive and developing” (Bakhtin “Marxism” 75), while “contradiction” points to the truth that human languages are forever conflicting because of their diversity and thus in social heteroglossia any focus is absent. To be more specific, “contradiction” by definition means the coexistence of a multitude of consciousness or ideologies which simultaneously and incessantly interact with one another within it. It becomes an ideologically contested entity. Because of a plurality of consciousnesses and polyvocality, there is no “discursive hierarchy” at all and, therefore, the spirit of “contradiction” is born. Since I have explained the trait of “multiplicity” in the above, in this part I will focus upon the feature of “contradiction” in *Ship of Fools*.

The spirit of “contradiction” partially sustains *Ship of Fools* as a polyphonic novel. I use the word “partially” because “contradiction” does not support Porter’s description of languages of the lower deck. An asymmetric structure sets the tone for “contradiction” in the novel—the voices of the upper deck have been given full space to articulate but on the lower deck, the individual voices have been forgotten or neglected purposely and so they almost vanish out of sight of the reader. As far as the upper deck life is concerned, the spirit of “contradiction” does exist. Almost every passenger obtains a platform for his / her particular views and visions although some are more fully drawn than others. Generally, no particular discourse described is focused or enlarged enough to distort, overwhelm or destroy the existence of other discourses. There is no undue emphasis on the authoritative figures, for example Captain Thiele or Dr. Schumann, or minor but subversive ones to spark the consciousness of the oppressed. The spirit of “contradiction” characterizes those upper-deck discourses and it is due to this feature, “contradiction,” that we hear these different discourses clashing against each other to form a real social heteroglossia. There are, definitely, layers and layers of

contradictions in *Ship of Fools*. The feature of “contradiction” of the upper deck has been so manifestly exploited that many critics have picked out the trait to be one of the key concepts of the novel. Thus, Frau Rittersdorf writes down her own impressions of Americans, noting that “the gradual mongrelization of that dismaying country by the mingling of the steerage sweepings of Europe and the blacks had resulted only in a mediocrity of feature and mind impossible to describe,” (SF 83) which are certainly full of bias; Jenny passionately desires to see what a Fordito really is on the island of Havana; Mrs. Treadwell carelessly reveals to Lizzi the most important secret kept by Freytag that his wife is a Jew; Herr Rieber and Arne Hansen fight because of their opposing stubborn egos; and Captain Thiele is intolerant of the dancing arena and singing in the steerage, claiming that the ‘savageness’ of “these filthy cattle” (SF 216) reinforces his “perpetual resistance of the elemental forces of darkness and disorder against the very spirit of civilization” (SF 216). The conflicts seem to continue an everlasting process because of the miscellaneous social consciousnesses.

It seems obvious that conflicts between nationalities have been quite a concern of Porter’s and thus the ostracism of Freytag has been chosen to particularly spark these national confrontations. In the above we are given an extensive description of the sense of racial superiority of the Germans, particularly their disdain toward Jews. The captain rearranges the seats at his table after Freytag’s marriage to a Jew has been divulged, while “his gaze ran around his circle of guests as if expecting their gratitude” (SF 245). He calls Freytag a person “under false pretenses” and reassures the Germans who are there seated that they “are all the right sort of people together” (SF 245). We also hear the moralistic view of his mind: “It would be a positive pleasure someday just to see how far he could buy his way into places where they [the heathens] wouldn’t dare to throw him out”! (SF 263) The discourse of the Jew and that of the German circle have been set against

each other to again glorify the spirit of conflict particularly between different nationalities. Likewise, most of the opinions of the passengers, the crew, and other characters have been presented with their confronting ideologies side by side. These confrontations among different consciousnesses exactly reflect Dr. Schumann's simile when he compares the zarzuela party to some beautiful "dancing and singing" (*SF* 349) hyenas and he himself to a human being. In short, Porter presents a true picture of the spirit of contradiction of the upper deck passengers by presenting numerous conflicting opinions to the reader, and such a clashing of spirits repeatedly reinforced by the author, seems the very spirit of the language of this novel.

C. Dialogue as the essence of language

Except for the shortcomings discussed above, *Ship of Fools* not only is written in a form that celebrates the spirit of social heteroglossia, but the characters' discourses also display what Bakhtin deems the essential elements of human language. These elements, including features of dialogism, inner dialogue, reported speech, and self-other relations, manifest themselves in the numberless discourses uttered by the passengers which make the novelistic language almost a true picturing of the linguistic situation. Porter's setting down the discourse of the upper-deck passengers does not resemble an artistic production so much as it represents an almost thoroughgoing record of human language that most successfully contributes to the individualization of characters.

1. Dialogism

Explaining Bakhtin's polyphonic poetics, Bell and Gardiner explain that human language consists of words "that have already been given determination as they have been used in multiple local settings" and intrinsically trail "debris of meaning from the past" (64). In the autonomous discourses of the upper-deck

passengers, we find that words have been used and reused, defined and re-defined in the different consciousnesses of the different languages. Take Freytag's marrying a Jewish wife as an example, the Germans hold a slanted attitude toward the issue and not surprisingly their perspective is formed mostly by racial hatred. The Spaniards express a similar opinion, which recalls their cultural background of a more hegemonic past. Only Jew Herr Löwenthal pours out his rage and indignation which seems a product of mixed personal and historical feelings. The Americans and the Swiss people have much sympathy for Freytag but again, each instance is based on dissimilar stances. Therefore, the ostracism of Freytag has been defined and decided upon extensively according to divergent perspectives and different languages. The event, when being discussed by different passengers, carries forward the meanings of both the past and the present to the perpetual process of meaning-creation. Thus Löwenthal's exasperated repugnance of Freytag later turns into the more moderate one: "you're more than welcome to sit at my table, if you haven't got any place else" (*SF* 264) upon reflection that he himself can gain profit by selling "graven images to the heathen (here especially Freytag) ... and get good prices for it too" (*SF* 263).

Another major event on board, namely, the fiesta held by the zarzuela party, bears the same traits of linguistic development. At the onset passengers express dissimilar attitudes toward the party's ticket-selling behavior. The sight of the tickets immediately triggers in the Indian nurse Nicolasa, repeated dreams in which her mother tries to tell her the winning number of the lottery while her mistress Señora Ortega, though she herself shows no real interest in those tickets, buys two and gives them to her. Jenny and David clearly have decided to keep their habitual aloof position toward the selling act which is, to them, another sign of behavior that deserves disappreciation. On the other hand the ticket-sellers, whether successful or failing, also have their own definitions of objects fit for sale.

Their selling behavior, like the ostracism of Freytag, builds up layer upon layer of meanings defined and redefined according to old and new situations, personal experiences and several other factors like the never-ending game of language usage itself. The fiesta generates new meaning in each conversation, rumor and discussion. Even in a simple refusal, as when Löwenthal tells the Spanish dancing girl to take the tickets and go away, their selling conduct generates an accretion of new meaning because of the convergence of two different languages and consciousnesses:

“Filthy pig,” she said in a Romany dialect.

“Whore,” he said in Yiddish. (*SF* 337)

The discussions of religion (clashing forces among Catholicism, Protestantism, and Judaism) and politics, though they are not portrayed as major events, definitely arouse different ideologues and create confrontations. In some minor conversations held by the passengers, the reader again witnesses the fact that human languages are made up of a series of confrontations, convergences, verbal interactions as the speakers and the listeners strive to understand, to distort, and to further explain to each other, and those features, called by Bakhtin dialogism, lay the foundation of the passengers' discourses on the *Vera*.

2. Interior Dialogue

Frau Rittersdorf has developed the habit of journal writing in which she sets down what she believes is reasonable, righteous, convincing and intelligent. Through such a habit she engages in a form of ongoing dialogue and it is as if the journal is holding an imaginary dialogue with the lady herself. The speech genre of Rittersdorf's journals shows an active interaction of the two worlds--the outer and the inner--and the reader sees what prompts Rittersdorf to write down her inner

language is actually those events she sees around her. After being rather put off by the expressionless faces of Jenny and David, Rittersdorf instantly takes out her notepad to set down her bigotry toward Americans by criticizing their naming habits. In another journal entry Rittersdorf excitedly reveals the Freytag incident to her dead husband and thereby the outer social languages are incorporated into the inner speech. From the content of the journals we realize that Frau Rittersdorf sometimes speaks to her dead husband. Her dead husband, whatever he really is, represents the spirit of true Germanism that has been formed during her upbringing, and also Rittersdorf frequently dialogizes with her dead husband because she longs to win the support not of the dead but of the spirit he represents which, after all, is an embodiment of her own moral values. In other journal entries Rittersdorf utters her inner speech to an imaginary audience—especially when she writes down her admiration for the rich Mexican brewer, but at the same time she fears being the object of others' talk. Her imaginary audience is the incarnation of general German public views. The language she uses is exactly in the form of a moral "guide"—"A German woman should not ... I should not ... I need the firm but tender guidance of a husband" (*SF* 34)--which actually is based on principles she learned from real life situations, principles which she determines to set for herself as the correct and decent behavior for a proper German woman. Her inner dialogue is formed by two voices—one tells of the assurances of Don Pedro's friends from his asking for her hand and the other resolutely warns her about the idea of marrying him as something wrong and shameful. In her dialogue the second voice exhibits a stronger will than the first one. Porter's description of both the inner and the outer languages of Frau Rittersdorf shows what she is—in front of the crowd she appears confident and graceful. Being alone with her roommate, another German woman, Frau Schmitt, she is aggressive and somewhat highhanded. Actually, Rittersdorf's journal-keeping habit indicates her refusal or inability to communicate with certain passengers, which allows the reader to see

her lack of security! Her ostensible confidence is a disguise to cover her inner insecurity.

Part of Captain Thiele's discourse also manifests itself in the form of inner dialogue. Generally passengers look upon him as a representative of justice and reason—an absolute authority; nevertheless, his inner discourse denies that he is such a man. His interior speech shows that he is simply a man who shares similar viewpoints with other German passengers, one who bears a sense of superiority and racial / personal arrogance toward others:

The Captain found himself divided into many sections: he loathed Catholics on principle ... he was violently prejudiced against Spaniards as well as Mexicans, and he felt it was beneath his dignity to take the advice of a priest, as well as to admit any human meaning or importance in the doings of the rabble in the steerage. (*SF* 172-73)

Captain Thiele's discourse reveals that he is not a compassionate man but a narrow-minded and proud authoritative figure. A most interesting depiction of his inner discourse, which also displays one significant trait of his personality, occurs when the priest suggests that they ignore the disturbance (because of the conflicting religious views) among the steerage, his imagination immediately pictures himself as the center of power giving orders and distributing tasks amidst a scene of mob violence or in a lawless situation. Thus a seemingly trifling dispute on the boat he turns into an explosive riot: his "violent imagination which now took possession of him. He dreamed for a brief moment of a cinematic crisis full of darkness, hand-to-hand struggle ..." (*SF* 173). Such an imagination always outwits his objective evaluation of situations and at the same time displays his real spirit—the captain turns out to be a man who takes advantage of any opportunity to realize his absolute power and unquestionable authority.

D. Conception of self based on self-other assumption

In Bakhtin's theoretical assumptions concerning I-You relationship, he reiterates the "incomplete vision of the self"--the self can be solely perceived and determined from without by others. Interestingly, in *Ship of Fools* we discover that the perception of a character can be fully constructed only through the discourses of other characters. Take the description of Jenny Brown as an example. We witness her limited vision of her own passion, ambition and her fluctuating feeling about David. But, it is through others' discourses that we gain an overall picture of the heroine's conduct. We hear David's criticism of her overt passion, Rittersdorf's complaint of her unfriendliness, Fraytag's devaluation of her fastidiousness, the Spaniards' belittlement of her hypocrisy and the judgment of the author which is juxtaposed among the many others. The discourses of the others help to construct the heroine as a complete human being within a much larger frame. Thus Jenny's hampered perspective of the self has been completed only because of other people's extra-local vision of her. Take Elsa Lutz, the only daughter of the Swiss hotel keeper, as another example. The reader sees her restricted vision of herself as a big unattractive girl who can hardly arouse any interest in men. On the other hand, the reader also discovers, in the discourses of other passengers, the reason Elsa never succeeds in having sex appeal is that she is traveling with her parents. Failing to attract the attention of Arne Hansen, an ideal spouse as suggested by her parents, Elsa secretly admires one Cuban student. But she is too rigid and shy to dance with "the beautiful merry one for her" (SF 434) when he invites her and the impatient Cuban youth utters unpleasantly in Spanish: "Perdoneme!" which enables the reader to understand how boring and disappointed Elsa is in the eyes of the other sex. The vision of Elsa, again, cannot be completed without the discourse of others. Similarly, most characters in *Ship of Fools* all express somewhat narrow perceptions of their selves, and again the

completeness of the view (of those characters) has been fulfilled in the discourses of other characters as well as the author.

E. Unfinalizability

As Bakhtin points out, unfinalizability bespeaks the spirit of polyphonic novel since the dialogue within the novel, if it truly resembles social, everyday human language, should not come to an end when the book is closed. *Ship of Fools* ends on a strong note of unfinalizability. The passengers' disembarkation at different harbors brings an end to the novel, but their stories do not stop with the close of the book. The reader can almost unfailingly predict the upper-deck passengers' future conduct because most of them will carry on their previous behavior as described in the course of the novel. To be precise, I believe that the end of the novel strongly expresses a sense of unfinalizability because most passengers do not reach any awareness of their own stupidity and they have not been awakened from their incomplete vision of human life by any event described in the journey. They do not resemble such classical literary characters as Carrie Meeber in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, Paul Morel in D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and many others who usually undergo a certain psychological transformation or spiritual awakening so that the end of the novel usually hints at their new perspectives and a refocused future life. *Ship of Fools* thus presents an authentic account of passengers' lives, and since Porter does not render her services to flash out her literary imagination of those passengers' lives, the passengers will surely continue to be what they are in the future. In other words, most of them remain the same persons not only throughout the novel but will also do so after the end of the novel.

III. The authorial discourse

The visible authorial discourse in *Ship of Fools* generally is expressed in a tone of detachment and disinterest when giving an account of the story of individual passengers. There is, however, a phenomenon in Porter's qualification of her characters that is quite apparent. In other words, I believe the author is consciously making fun of her characters. Porter enjoys comparing the behavior of some of her characters to that of animals, which surely is meant to arouse laughter. In the following sections I will discuss two traits concerning the visible authorial discourse in *Ship of Fools*.

A. The qualification of the discourse of the protagonists

Authorial discourse does exist in *Ship of Fools*. When describing a certain character or event, Porter's voice sounds objective and frankly direct. There appears neither manifest authorial interruption nor distortion of the discourses of the protagonists for she simply lets them talk. As a reader, I cannot but admire her talent at observing the diversity of human language of which she makes a lifelike record. Herr Hutten talks exactly like the scholar he is, the hotel keeper Herr Lutz views everything with careful calculation, Dr. Schumann accurately diagnoses La Condesa as a patient undergoing some serious neurotic problems, and Johann thinks exactly like an irrational young boy who is eager to behave like a grown-up. There is, however, one evident shortcoming—one sentence at the beginning of the book carelessly reveals Porter's position as an omniscient author. Introducing Mrs. Treadwell and praising her beauty, Porter hastily adds one sentence in parentheses: "(though before the voyage was over, she would be kissed, seriously, by that very young man)" (*SF* 31). What makes the author treat Mrs. Treadwell as a special character, especially by revealing this secret in a titillating tone of gossipy confidentiality, stressing the word "seriously"? Some critics believe that the two American female passengers, namely Jenny and Mrs. Treadwell, were written in the image of the author. Jenny's traveling with David

reminds the informed reader of Porter's own trip to Germany with her husband-to-be Eugene Pressly; on the other hand, Mrs. Treadwell's age is closer to Porter's own when she was traveling. Therefore the sentence which Porter adds to reinforce Mrs. Treadwell's unfailing sex appeal may be an act of self-congratulation and such discovery again reminds the reader of Harold Bloom's comment on the author: "Narcissism has gotten an absurdly bad name, but Freud certainly would snort at that, and so should we. A beautiful lyricist and a beautiful woman necessarily celebrate their own beauty, and Porter surpassingly was both" (4).

Porter enjoys qualifying the statements or mental discourse of her protagonists though those evaluative words basically are neither ironic nor satiric. Most of all the qualifying speech is impartial and unprejudiced. Porter particularly adds the words "as if" whenever she is commenting on the discourse of her protagonists. This not only prepares the reader for the authorial critique but also distinguishes the authorial speech from the protagonists'. For example, Porter portrays Herr Hutten's stance when he is preaching to his wife thus: "in majestic benevolence, as if he were getting ready to address his classes" (*SF* 35). In this sentence, "majestic benevolence" is a disinterested or ironic depiction of Hutten's attitude toward his obedient wife whereas the rest of the sentence is Porter's observation from an extralocal and transgredient position. Similar sentences which reveal the surplus of vision of the author permeate the novel. For instance, Lizzi was once "tossing her head like an unmanageable mare" (*SF* 117) which faithfully reveals Lizzi's uncontrollable temper; Dr. Schumann speaks to La Condesa "as if he were speaking to an obstinate child" (*SF* 121) which suggests his condescension toward her; Amparo "stood solidly fixed ... toes turned out as if she were about to begin a dance" reminds the reader that she is a dancer; Lola turns to toast the Captain and "brandished her wine glass in all directions like a weapon" (*SF* 431) suggests her

defiance in approaching the most authoritative figure on the *Vera*; Freytag's imagining seeing his Jewish wife Mary around "as if the ship were even then being warped into the dock and Mary was there on the pier waiting for him" (*SF* 413) indicates Freytag's urgent need of his wife's support; Johann's "German merchant blood warming to the financial aspects of his trade, curiosity almost overcoming his other feeling" (*SF* 310) unbiasedly sketches Johann's psychic condition; and Treadwell's grasping her sandals "by the sole firmly as if it too were a weapon" (*SF* 466) reminds the reader that she has just smashed Denny's face with the sole of the other sandal. The authorial speech thus appears in a discernible and uniform style that neither twists nor colors the discourse of the protagonists but conveys it in a tone that is freed from self-interest. No wonder Robert B. Heilman praises Porter's style: "she sees them [the passengers] with easy clarity and goes right to the point," (27) and "the language and syntax reveal Miss Porter's eye for precision, specification, and distinctions" (30).

B. Writing as a caricaturist

Another aspect of the authorial language in *Ship of Fools* shows Porter's acute skepticism--she enjoys associating her passengers with animal behaviors which always triumphantly arouse laughter. The author never troubles to promote the image of human beings as something noble and sincere; instead, she strives to devalue them by "the baleful vision of human folly ...by the particular disfigurements" (Solotaroff 281).

Among the critics, Liberman was perhaps the first one to identify the animal imagery in Porter's description. He compares the novel to a beast epic in that he finds that the Germanic character, especially Herr Reiber's, "is to be seen reflected in the face not of a man but of a pig" (Liberman "Short Story as Chapter" 67). The connecting of passenger deeds to animal behavior is everywhere in the novel.

Pepe “was tricky as a monkey and as coldly long-lasting as a frog” (*SF* 225), the Captain, when kept waiting at the dining table, had to “brood in ruffled, glaring, swollen immobility, extremely resembling an insulted parrot” (*SF* 424), a man at the table glanced at the beggar “as if he were a dog too repulsive even to kick” (*SF* 5), Frau Rittersdorf complains that traveling with those Spanish deportees is not proper at all since “after all, we did not engage to travel on a cattle boat” (*SF* 60), the purser finds himself “dodging and striking at the colored balloons floating in his path as if they were perhaps horseflies” (*SF* 421), Lizzi is to Rieber “the fine tall creature who moved like a good racing mare” (*SF* 417) and he “bleated like a goat, ‘Baaah, meeeeh!’” (*SF* 448) when hit by Hansen. Undeniably Porter’s characterization is vivid with imagery, but the visible authorial discourse compels the reader to see the passengers, except for one or two, as some laughable, funny animals “rather than full-fleshed human beings” (Cory 24). In other words, through her speech the reader sees the sarcastic attitude of an author who intends to view her characters as animals of low intelligence and small value. We can compare the description of those animals in *Aesop Fables* who behave like human beings, and also the ones with human wisdom and insight, like those whom Gulliver meets in the land of the Houyhnhnms, only to discover that Porter’s presenting her characters via the debased images of animals is purposeful and intentional.

IV. Feasibility of Bakhtin’s Polyphony

Even though handicapped by the sarcastic, cynical, and even misanthropic authorial discourse as well as the unsymmetrical characterization, *Ship of Fools* nevertheless surpasses other novels in its polyphonic aspects. The novel is formed by voluminous small talks of the passengers, with each one “trapped in that tiny segment of reality he calls his own, which he thinks about, and talks about, and tries to project to a listener equally obsessed,” (Bloom 38) and strives to continue

the process of collision and conflict that represents an everlasting truth of social heteroglossia. “Truth” is what Porter insists upon as the overriding keynote of the novel, and therefore she names the ship *Vera*, meaning “true” in Latin. Porter’s image of “truth” bears a biblical implication, namely the Tower of Babel, and is constructed in the belief that divergent languages bring more misunderstanding and separation among men. This is Porter’s vision of the “true” human predicament. Therefore miscellaneous views representing dissimilar ideologies that manage to show themselves in different kinds of talk had become Porter’s main task in writing this novel. As a result, the reader is surprised at how tremendously differently the characters express their views, how far the strength of their languages extends, and how realistic the linguistic depictions are in Porter’s portrayal. A faithful reproduction of the “true human linguistic situation” is the undeniable charm of *Ship of Fools*.

Placed on a polar scale, *Ship of Fools* no doubt is close to the polyphonic pole. Nevertheless, such a novel has suffered severe attacks from critics: except for perhaps Liberman, critics generally all agree that the novel should not be ranked as a great work due to its poor characterization, deficient literary technique in the handling of the theme, and a faulty structure that deviates from that of the traditional novel. Indeed, concerning Porter’s flat, even static characterization, almost all of the passengers behave very much the same throughout the span of the novel. They reiterate similar viewpoints by the latter half of the novel so the reader can predict their psychological motivations and reactions without much trouble and thus any further characterization seems superadded and meaningless. Thus, the most serious defect of Porter’s characterization is that most passengers, except for perhaps Dr. Schumann who seems to realize at the last moment his own fault in confining La Condesa as a love-prisoner, remain what they were at the moment of embarkation. They bear exactly the same personalities when they

disembark at different harbors and, in a sense, the journey brings them nothing incisive, and nothing helps them penetrate to a better understanding of life in the future. Life on the *Vera* reflects exactly this description from E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*:

Most of life is so dull that there is nothing to be said about it, and the books and talk that would describe it as interesting are obliged to exaggerate, in the hope of justifying their own existence. Inside its cocoon of work or social obligation, the human spirit slumbers for the most part, registering the distinction between pleasure and pain, but not nearly as alert as we pretend. (145)

Ship of Fools depicts dull and boring human lives because the novel intends to present a true version of everyday life. Porter sees eye to eye with Forster in that “life on shipboard in only two days had begun to arrange itself with pleasant enough monotony” (*SF* 51) and the passengers will definitely carry on with the narrow habits of their previous lives like a bunch of fools. But such a faithful record of human life seems unsatisfactory and inappropriate to the special requirements of a literary work. Take *A Passage to India* as an example. Even though Forster revealed the above-mentioned concept that “most of life is so dull,” his heroes and heroines, including Dr. Aziz, Mr. Fielding, Adela Quested and Mrs. Moore all undergo tremendous personal developments that help them adjust their attitudes in their future life. Furthermore, the friendship between Aziz and Fielding, which has been seriously challenged by national / cultural / religious misunderstandings, not only remains significant in historical sense but also celebrates the warmth and the courage of humanity. These are reasons why *A Passage to India* wins applause from the reader. *Ship of Fools* manifestly lacks a literary scheme that transforms a “real life situation” into a “literary imagination of real life.” In a “real life situation” a man may outwardly and inwardly lead an ordinary and unremarkable life whereas in a “literary imagination of real life” not

only has the man's life been condensed and compressed into fewer words or scenes as we see in a film but also a certain portion of the man's life is always amplified to focus upon certain significant transformations that suggest something meaningful has happened both to the characters and in the book as a whole. Therefore literary works function as moral, suggestive, and purposeful, and a "literary imagination of real life" cannot be equal to "real life situation." *Ship of Fools* is a novel about a real life situation. We see an ambitious author who is eager to get rid of any Americanism or regionalism which has colored her work, making it distinguished and unique, but who now tries to handle a timeless and ageless theme that cuts across several nationalities which, ultimately, conveys merely the author's "growing cynicism during the forties and fifties about world affairs and politics" (Brinkmeyer 182). Most passengers, on the contrary, do not reach any conscious awareness about their own confinement and foolishness through the issues they encounter during the journey. No wonder Eileen Baldeshwiler states: "Doubtless Katherine Anne Porter succeeds best in her meticulously woven mimeses of the human situation, rather than in her sharper stories as a social critic" (51).

Porter's way of characterizing numerous heroes and heroines is another case of failure. Great literature always handles few individual stories instead of numerous chaotic tales, as in *Ship of Fools*, which easily confuses the reader. Thus, William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom* illustrates the rise and fall of a Southern figure Thomas Sutpen, Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* portrays the life adventure of a picaresque figure Augie March, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* sketches Marlow's profound doubts, alienation, and confusion about British imperialism, and Henry James' *Wings of the Dove* handles the complex moral treachery of Kate Cory and Merton Densher. The stories of those heroes, from the onset, engage readers' hearts, causing them to identify themselves with the lives of those heroes. Porter's characterization, nevertheless, arbitrarily

violates the traditional mode of characterization. She includes numerous incidental characters, some of whom are portrayed as “of the same general type” (Miller 153) while many have even been inadequately developed, in her effort to create a novel of universality. The result is confusion and chaos because there seems neither a central point nor any parallel relationship between the stories, or stories that contribute to the overall effect of the novel. In other words, there is neither a main or central story nor any central conflict in *Ship of Fools* to elicit the reader's attention. Interestingly, such “absence of any focus” is one of the most desirable features in the polyphonic novel proposed by Bakhtin. We can compare *Ship of Fools* with literary works with myriad characters, for example Homer's *Iliad*, and, as Miller suggests, Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. All of them center upon one theme, thus “the novel reveals its characters from as many different vantage points as are consistent with the full development and final resolution of its conflict” (Miller 152). Solotaroff's words “After fifty pages they [the passengers] are predicable; after a hundred they are less revealing of human nature than they are of Miss Porter's design and sensibility,” (281) and Phyllis Richardson's citing of Janis P. Stout's words: “Porter needs far fewer than the books' 497 pages to convey these characters and their relationships” (6), clearly reveal Porter's unsuccessful handling of a central conflict in *Ship of Fools* in relation to her characterization.

Ship of Fools in many ways is a good representative of a polyphonic novel, especially due to the author's “ability to use language, to make the words work to convey shades of character and implications of event” (Sullivan 117). The numerous passengers carrying on of small talks and interior dialogues about various episodes and worldly affairs triumphantly constitute a true picture of social heteroglossia in the Bakhtinian sense. Nevertheless a faithful reproduction of true human social languages does not alone fulfill the special requirements of the novel,

which is always in need of literary techniques that transform true human life situations into a literary version of human life in such a way as to make the description of life much more condensed, meaningful, and purposeful. Bakhtin's enthusiastic celebration of the incorporation of social heteroglossia to make a polyphonic novel therefore needs to be reconsidered in accordance to the overall scheme of a literary work.

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