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HAL PORTER: FLAIR IN A COSY CORNER

Hal Porter. *The Paper Chase*. 1966; rpt with corrections. Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1980. 305 pp. Paper \$9.95.

Hal Porter. Selected and edited with an introduction and bibliography by Mary Lord. Portable Australian Authors Series. Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1980. 408 pp. No price quoted.

Hal Porter is a Jack of the novel, poetry, drama, regional history, coffee table book, travel book, film script, et cetera, and master, as Mary Lord's selection and introduction confirm, of the short story and autobiography. If *The Portable Hal Porter* invites critical reorientation, it is because of the prominence of *A Handful of Pennies*, Porter's first novel, and the useful collection of Porter's comments and prejudices on writers and writing, especially his own. Mary Lord's selection will be attractive to the fairly typical initiate who already owns the volumes available in paperback only (*The Watcher* and Leonie Kramer's selection of short stories for Angus and Robertson) and who wants more of Porter. There are four poems, old fashioned, pretty, careful, predictably overcrafted—an interesting soupçon, and enough. There is a documented feud between Porter and Tim Burstall, in which Porter, more indignant than intellectual, is colourful and probably right. And there is a good choice of stories not printed in the Kramer selection, together with a "necessarily brief" extract from *The Watcher*, "necessarily", one presumes, for reasons relating to copyright. Since *The Watcher* is widely owned and in print, the abbreviation may be more conspicuous than regrettable. Its minor representation here is probably outweighed by the advantage of getting *A Handful of Pennies*, a neglected novel, back into print as the major text, although Mary Lord makes no critical assault on

The Watcher's pre-eminence.

The subject of *A Handful of Pennies* is also its setting: occupied Japan in 1950. Porter examines sexual and cultural relationships between Westerners and Japanese, and concludes (if that is the word for something as much a *donné* as a thesis) that, in Mary Lord's summary, "the Westerners . . . not only corrupt the vanquished Japanese, each corrupts the other and himself." The novel does command our engagement with, and some assent to, the serious evocation of a poisonous milieu; but the "truth" is strained and forced through the perceptions of a heavily judgemental omniscient narrator. Though the suffusion is strictly that of Porter the moralist, he does create a world of shine and detail to which one concedes more authenticity than in *The Tilted Cross* or *The Right Thing*, despite his rather fallacious insistence, in the published comments, that his novels, somehow *necessarily*, convey actuality simply because they are solidly, "unimaginatively" based on it.

"Democratic-Occupation", the unnatural condition of neither Peace nor War, is described as:

*the evangelist handing out pamphlets of ornamented lies.
Specious and venal, he bribes with delicacies of mendacity,
with wafers of half-truth, with bizarre salads slimy from the
oil-and-vinegar of lubricity.*

*Within the girdle of his embrace, victor and vanquished
embrace, fondle the ex-enemy body, poke fingers into the eyes
of minds.*

*I am still innocent country person, they might all cry, I
am integrity, a wouser, enlightened, a sea-scout leader, I cook
bread-and-butter pudding, keep myself to myself, write to
auntie every Sunday, am pleasant to natives but draw the line,
played bridge with the brigadier, made a coloured movie of the
Hollyhock Festival, love the quaint lee – the children, dismissed
the cook – tipsy, my dear, went ski-ing, swimming, skimming,
am going to hate Australia and no servants, am still innocent –
country person, wisdom-and-place person.*

Blind, all blinded, in a camping-park of the blind.

A Handful of Pennies pushes this argument through every elaborate sentence, and language becomes a quest, coruscating yet often regrettably irresistible or unnecessary, for epigram, linguis-

tic quip, shining metaphor, verbal paradox and display, which will suffuse absolute narrative certainties.

This kind of literary assault points up the difference between Porter the novelist and Porter the autobiographer. In an interview with Mary Lord first published in this form in *The Portable Hal Porter*, he suggests that the novels are less successful than the short stories and autobiographies because the former are less disciplined by a framework, or by fact, and provide the "chance to waffle on". The real point is that too often in the novels the verbal display *becomes* waffle because it is overelaborate or repetitive, and lacks a controlling tone. Despite his overwhelming definiteness, values, prejudices, preferences and cosinesses, the "I" (or "I's") of the short stories and autobiographies is an identifiable and separate narrator, a performing ringmaster, against whom the reader's resistance is possible, since he is not suffusing required values into the narrative. All the tricks of acting on paper—of weaving homely nuances, of games at spelling out, of metaphorical expressions of astonishment or delight—are performed in a world in which the narrator's values are equally "on show".

Ostensibly, *A Handful of Pennies* examines the corruption of and within a culture, but its theme anticipates a preoccupation, that runs through most of the autobiographies and stories, with the corruption of people by people, and corruption within people. It is clear that Porter, or his rhetoric, or his narrators, find the needs, weaknesses and predatoriness of human beings so potentially damaging that human relationships are to be seen as either limited by a defensive guard or lack of trust, or contaminated by exploitation or pain. With the exception of the relationship between the Watcher and his mother, it is hard to think of any moderately lasting or moderately deep or successful relationship in his writings. *The Paper Chase*, for example, chronicles and endorses the cosy pilgrimage of keeping to one's self. Friendship exists, but only through respect or guarded compassion. A marriage, it seems, can never be excused, least of all, as Porter says of his own, on the grounds of love. Passion is just a need, shortlived, predatory, and mistaken if construed as altruistically manageable. It is not only that Porter is suspicious

of idealism; he is, it appears, suspicious to an extreme of altruistic realism, and the entertainment in his "pitiless pity" is largely a black comic apprehension of the mess people make of relationships. This determination, in every slant we are offered on human relationships and sexual love, to provide an extreme of unsentimental and anti-romantic perception, seems to me to push Porter and his narrators so far into a voyeuristic corner that, despite the comic energy, it is difficult to find the optimism, in this important respect, that he and his critics assert. The optimism is really flair in a corner, and the celebration of cosiness.

The reprinting by University of Queensland Press of *The Paper Chase* is a justified attempt to keep alive a work that has suffered unfairly the fate of the sequel. Porter's flair is inseparable from his use of a performing narrator; his tradition is that of Fielding and Thackeray brought into a twentieth century context in which an autobiographical narrator is apparently more acceptable. (It is difficult to see, however, why he should not write a novel using the same techniques as he uses in his autobiographies.) *The Paper Chase* lacks the thematic integration of episodes, the design, the control over past in relation to present and, from the modern critic's point of view, the unity of *The Watcher*. But if the sequel is inferior by that kind of aesthetic, it demonstrates still the same detail, familiarity and flair, and the evidence of Porter's apparently inimitable talent at getting factual detail to do his imaginative work.