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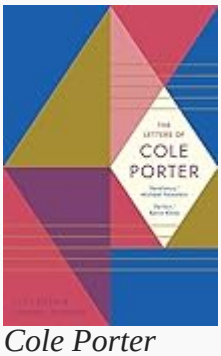
The bijou from Peru

by *Kyle Smith*

On The Letters of Cole Porter, edited by Cliff Eisen and Dominic McHugh.

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



Cole Porter
The Letters of Cole Porter

Yale University Press, 672 pages, $35.00

An underrated pleasure is reading about the money woes of famous people. If world-conquering figures awash in funds nevertheless fret about dollars and cents, one's own load of pecuniary anxiety becomes lighter. Cole Porter (1891–1964) began to grace the Broadway stage with his tunes in 1915, when he was only twenty-four, and was the grateful recipient of major injections of dosh from both his wealthy family (his grandfather James Omar Cole was sometimes labeled "the wealthiest man in Indiana") and his rich wife, the Kentucky divorcée Linda Lee Thomas. Yet even after having written "Let's Do It, Let's Fall in Love," "What Is This Thing Called Love?," "I Happen to Like New York," "Night and Day," and "Don't Fence Me In," he openly groused about money, for many years to come. In 1928 he wrote to his cousin and financial manager Harvey Cole to borrow $10,000, a huge amount, but he said he expected to soon be earning $25,000 a year. In 1930 he spent $18,000 on a trip around the world—$300,000 in today's money. He telegraphed Harvey the following year to warn him against paying off a previous loan because "i haven't a red cent." Following his hits Anything Goes and Gay Divorce, he borrowed $6,000 in 1934. He never really parted ways with financial worry until his sixties, when his mother, Kate, died and left him $550,000 in 1952 (more than five million in today's dollars).

Porter's writing ability was phenomenal, but his spending ability was too. His *joie de vivre* proves infectious in *The Letters of Cole Porter*, edited by Cliff Eisen of King's College, London, and Dominic McHugh of the University of Sheffield.1 Long, luxurious trips to Europe and the Holy Land and the Caribbean and the Pacific served nicely to recharge the composer-lyricist's batteries. It was during one such luxury excursion, in the company of his wife and a friend since Yale days, the actor Monty Woolley, that Porter, gazing over the side of the ship at some majestic sight or other (the location varied in different versions of the story), exclaimed, "It's delightful!" His wife chimed in, "It's delicious!," and Woolley followed through with "It's de-lovely!" I do hope Porter wrote off the cost of the trip as a business expense.

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Approaching a life via a volume of letters such as these is, however, a bit like trying to read through a mystery novel from which half the consonants have been removed. The reader eager to know what it might have been like to be a gay man married to a woman for forty years (or to glean some sense of what it might have felt like to be Linda Porter, who battled lung ailments and pre-deceased her husband by a decade) will be vexed. Though Porter wrote flirty letters to other gay men, some of them lovers, there is no reflection on his marriage of convenience, and the comments to those lovers don't reveal much deep emotional involvement. Nor do Porter's letters (with very rare exceptions) provide insights into his creative process, although Eisen and McHugh generously provide occasional snippets of interviews in which Porter was asked about such matters (and provided thoroughly massaged answers). They also reprint diary entries from Porter's Hollywood foray, which help to fill out the book.

Porter saved up his wit for his paid writing. Almost never in this volume does the reader encounter amusingly bitchy asides and aperçus about the well-shod and the Broadway scene. From early days in France—Porter moved to Paris in 1917 to join the relief effort and met his wife there the following year—Porter loved to mingle with the nobs and the aristos, and if he mentioned them to correspondents it was admiringly.

A "delicate rather than a robust boy"—according to his principal at Worcester Academy in Massachusetts, Porter's secondary school—the scion of Peru, Indiana, was already writing songs at prep school, none of which survive. At Yale, where he studied French, German, and Latin and was a member of the Glee Club, the Whiffenpoofs (founded in 1909, the year before he arrived), and the Yale Dramatic Association, Porter wrote some three hundred songs, though all but eighteen are lost. His fight song "Bull Dog" continues to be sung at Yale football games. A stint at Harvard Law School from 1913–14 ended, he later recalled in a magazine interview recounted in the book, when he played one of his compositions at a party and the dean told him, "Porter—don't waste your time. Get busy and study music." Porter duly transferred to the Harvard School of Music. By 1915,

a Broadway agent named Elizabeth Marbury was urging him to write for the New York stage. Plans for his first Broadway musical, *See America First*, immediately fell into place. "It may seem that I am making a large order for the young man," Marbury told the *New Haven Register*, "but I am convinced that Mr. Porter is the one man of the many who can measure up to the standard set by the late Sir Arthur Sullivan." Porter was twenty-three. *See America First* didn't last, and Porter thought he was finished. "As they dismantled the scenery and trucked it out of the stage alley, I honestly believed I was disgraced for the rest of my life," he said years later in an interview.

Porter's letters from Europe in the late 1910s and '20s are his chattiest and most creative, burbling with contrived youth. "Jack Clark's back, having persuaded his fiancée in the Midi somewhere that it would be much simpler if she married someone else," he wrote Woolley in 1918. In the same letter, he wrote charmingly of Linda: "She happens to be the most perfect woman in the world and I'm falling so in love with her that I'm attractively triste. It may merely be the Spring, but it looks dangerously like the real thing and I'm quite terrified, for there's nothing like it to kill concentration." The pair married in Paris in 1919 and traveled widely in Europe and North Africa, with frequent trips back to New York where Porter launched various revue-style shows, before the book musical became the rule. Porter also dabbled in ballet, both professionally (the score for Within the Quota) and personally (Boris Kochno, the lover of the founder of the Ballets Russes, Sergei Diaghilev).

From Venice, where he and his wife established a home (the Ca' Rezzonico, where once the Robert Brownings resided), Porter wrote frequently to Kochno in an uncharacteristic register of histrionic devotion, and in mediocre French. Among the recipients of the Porters' lavish Venetian hospitality (Porter even rented a barge, hired a band to entertain, and held dance parties on it) was Richard Rodgers, who had earlier run into Noël Coward. Coward brokered an introduction between Rodgers and Porter, a man who appeared "thoroughly indolent" but "kept peppering me with questions about the Broadway musical theatre, revealing a remarkably keen knowledge of both popular and classical music," Rodgers later recalled. "Unquestionably, he was more than a social butterfly." When Porter played some of his compositions after dinner, a gobsmacked Rodgers asked the playboy why he wasn't writing for Broadway. Porter explained that three of his scores had already been produced there, adding that he had discovered the secret formula of hit songwriting: "I'll write Jewish tunes."

In 1935, he reflected on being dismissed in his early years: "They used to regard me as a dilettante," he told *Theatre World*, "and refused to believe that best-sellers could possibly emanate from a young man well-endowed with the world's goods."

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Porter's diary entries from his excursions to Hollywood, which began in 1935, are among the book's funniest passages. Story development proceeded lackadaisically compared to Broadway's frenetic pace. In 1936, when he suggested a revue built around sections of a newspaper, attendees at a conference with the producer Sam Katz "all leaped at this, as if I had suddenly discovered radium, and Sam suggested that after such a great idea I should go to the desert and take three weeks rest." Anyone familiar with the enduring Hollywood habit of expressing first maniacal enthusiasm and then total disdain for a given idea within the span of days or even minutes will nod with recognition. After the newspaper idea and many others foundered, Porter wrote, "On the way home in the motor, I figured out, by computing the salaries of the writers engaged on this picture so far, that it had cost mgm $29,000 to decide not to do a Revue." In 1936, Katz was so nervous about Porter's work for the Eleanor Powell–James Stewart movie *Born to Dance* he was producing that he asked Porter to come in and sing the entire score for the studio chieftains Louis B. Mayer and Irving Thalberg, among others. After the performance, Mayer immediately signed Porter to a new contract. Thalberg even smiled.

The horrendous riding accident of 1937, during which Porter toppled off a horse in Locust Valley, New York, which then fell on top of him, crushing his right leg and fracturing the left in several places, inspired surprisingly little commentary in Porter's letters. In one of the few in which Porter discussed his agony, he told Woolley on December 2, 1937, that his right leg was covered with blebs, small ulcers that form above damaged tissue. He was treated with Amartan—"the stuff they used for the burnt passengers of the Hindenburg." Nevertheless, "quite a few of [the boils] had to be cut off, which didn't add to my comfort."

Surgeries and howling pain, counteracted by drugs, were part of the routine for the last third of Porter's life, even as he bubbled with frothy tunes. He finished the show *You Never Know* (1938), a flop that nevertheless gave us "At Long Last Love," in the weeks after the riding mishap. Most of Porter's enduring successes came in middle age—shows such as *Kiss Me, Kate* (1948), *Can-Can* (1953), *Silk Stockings* (1955), and the movie *High Society* (1956). Porter makes occasional, usually dismissive references to physical therapy or the wheelchair he sometimes needed, most often in a blasé or sniffy tone. Yet when his right leg was finally amputated, in 1958, the event marked his creative demise, six years before his actual death. As he was in the hospital that winter, his final musical, *Aladdin*, a collaboration with S. J. Perelman, aired on television, in February, to negative reaction.

Until that horrible moment of amputation, though, Porter's writing expresses more querulousness about critics than his legs. He considered the reviewers as a lot to be brutally unfair as well as demonstrably inept at picking out which songs from a given show might endure. (Porter confessed that no one else could guess which songs would last, either.) At one point Porter spitefully sent a harried mgm researcher on a mission to gather up poor notices such as one particularly unkind

review, supposedly from *The New Yorker*. "Robert Benchley in the *New Yorker*, speaking of 'Begin the Beguine,' wondered why such a big production had been built around such a commonplace song," Porter wrote, demanding that the clipping be dug up and quoted in newspaper advertisements as a way of encouraging audiences to dismiss critical doubts attached to his current show, *The Seven Lively Arts* (1944). The editors of the present volume, baffled, write in a footnote, "Possibly Porter's memory failed him here." Benchley said nothing like this and his review of *Jubilee* (1935), the show that introduced "Begin the Beguine," was a rave. "I hope that it runs forever," Benchley wrote. Porter took his place in a long line of artists who proved more able to remember nonexistent slights than actual compliments.

Many of the most personal letters are to Porter's lover Nelson Barclift, a dancer-choreographer; Sam Stark, a Los Angeles jeweler Porter met on one of his Hollywood sojourns; and the actress Jean Howard. But Porter put little effort into them, and though they're hearty and friendly, there isn't much in them that merits attention. A rare funny note is a January 8, 1947, letter to Stark: "The doctor came today to look at my 'Common' cold + decided I wouldn't die. Thank God I won't die below my station!" A 1955 letter to George Eells contains this priceless note from Zürich: "Last night we were practically quoting Goethe in a little German restaurant here which nothing but the old aristocracy knows when in walked a sad-looking little man with bad teeth and so lonely. We had had several drinks and so we decided to take pity on him and asked him to join us. He turned out to be . . . [over] Darryl Zanuck." Zanuck, the emperor of Twentieth Century Fox, might have been the most prominent Swiss-American in Hollywood.

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Though Porter often left Linda when going off for jaunts with his lovers, he frequently struck a heartsick note when writing about her delicate health in the last five years of her life. Hot, humid weather exacerbated her lung ailments. But in November of 1949 he wrote to Stark, "A month ago I felt that she couldn't live for more than half a year more." Things changed, however, "due to my having had her apartment air-conditioned. What I resent is that I thought of this and not her Doctor." Linda's health recovered for long stretches, but after many scares she perished of emphysema in 1954.

Porter's secretary Madeline Smith became friendly with Stark and continued to provide updates on his health after the grueling 1958 leg removal. The final chapter of the book consists mainly of Porter's polite thank-you notes and refusals of offers of work. "You will have to arrange some way by which any added numbers in can can, as a picture, will be either other songs of mine or songs written by somebody else," he wrote his agent Irving Lazar on April 7, 1959. "The reason for this is because I am living in torture and it doesn't seem to decrease." Friendly competitors such as Alan Jay Lerner and Irving Berlin tried to nudge him back to work, but Porter had difficulty

maneuvering his artificial leg and endured several months-long stays at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center in Manhattan while Mrs. Smith noted with alarm his evident depression and lack of appetite. The absence of even performative effervescence in his terse final six years of letters is chilling. His secretary, who called him "the Little Boss," noted with dismay that Porter had no belief system to comfort him. "I regret so much that he has not the strength, that comes in time of need, of a bolstering religion," she wrote Stark on November 3, 1958. "Even a Buddhist, a Seven [sic] Day Adventist, a Jehova's [sic] Witness, any thing to take the place of 'just nothing.' Without faith—one is like a stained glass window in the dark."

Porter's art has proven as enduring as Berlin's, calling to mind Art Deco, black tie, martinis, then mgm technicolor. On screen, his songs conjure up the likes of Fred Astaire (The Gay Divorcee, the movie cognate of Gay Divorce) and Cary Grant (the biographical film Night and Day) and Bing Crosby (High Society). Porter's work was a buffet of wordplay and melody, a swell party that went on for forty years. It's pleasing that the man himself was a hard-working bon vivant, a playboy with a redoubtable work ethic. Grand tours, floating dance clubs, an apartment in the Waldorf-Astoria: few famous men lived up to their images so completely. In a 1957 note to Howard, Porter sweetly acknowledged his free-spending rise from country lad to city sybarite: "Perhaps the dinner wasn't big enough for you—there were only nineteen—but, of course, I am a simple boy from Indiana who likes quiet evenings." Life for Cole Porter was wunderbar.

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1 *The Letters of Cole Porter*, edited by Cliff Eisen and Dominic McHugh; Yale University Press, 672 pages, $35.

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