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A Hard and Admirable Toughness: The Stories of Peter Taylor



This is a generous book, *The Collected Stories of Peter Taylor*, generous but demanding, too. It contains twenty-one of the some forty-five stories which the author has published over a period of approximately thirty years.* Contrasted to the technical experimentation of such a contemporary short story writer as Donald

* His two earliest stories, Mr. Taylor has informed me, appeared in March and April of 1937 in *River*, a little magazine published at Oxford, Mississippi; neither is included in the present collection. "Dean of Men" was written in 1969 and originally published in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*.

The Hollins Critic

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Barthelme or the unzipped frankness of a Robert Coover or the late Richard Farina, Peter Taylor's quiet and meticulously crafted fiction seems almost removed from contemporary reality, almost Edwardian. Rereading (and in two or three cases reading for the first time) his stories, I sometimes felt that I was reliving some only vaguely-remembered events from my own past, or some aspect of it; I frequently shared the feeling expressed by a character in one of Mr. Taylor's stories, "the feeling . . . that Time itself had stopped and was actually waiting for me instead of passing me by and leaving me behind. . . ."

For it is time which is perhaps the most important force in Mr. Taylor's short stories, time and the past, a past which is like a ghost definitely uncomfortable in the clamour of post-Rooseveltian America, a past which for both good and ill lingers on in relatively few pockets of American life and which I expect must be almost unrecognizable to most Americans, regardless of class or caste, who were born after World War Two, and which must seem as foreign to contemporary ghetto dwellers as Mrs. Stowe's novel or a play like DuBose Heyward's "Brass Ankle." Here it lies in these elegant and thoughtful stories, this almost forgotten past and uneasy present.

Consider Mr. Taylor's first collection, *A Long Fourth and Other Stories*, published in 1948. With the exception of a so-so "war" piece, all of these early stories are concerned with family relationships in respectable, urban, middle or upper middle class Tennessee. All of them depict the stresses and strains which are constantly undermining or threatening to undermine these family relationships. All of them are concerned with the confrontation of past and present and the deterioration of old standards of conduct. The title story, for example, contrasts white mistress and black servant, mother and son, husband and wife, brother and sister, in a sequence of incidents highlighted by the son's almost complete withdrawal from the family and "what it stands for." Soon-to-be-inducted-into-the-army, the son lives in a world which his parents can not or will not comprehend. His

sense of values, particularly his ideas concerning race, are as foreign to his family as they are to the family's servants. His mother, a type who appears and reappears in Mr. Taylor's fiction, is isolated in and separated by time. She is lost, bewildered, and undone. As the listener to the long-winded old gentleman of a much later Taylor story comments, it is Time which makes such people "strangers to one another as no distance across the surface of the earth nowadays, and no difference in nationality, could possibly have . . ."

Such confrontations between past and present and their effects on family relations have continued to furnish subject and theme for most of Peter Taylor's best stories. Concerning his second volume of short stories, *The Widows of Thornton*, 1954, he has written:

My idea was to write a group of stories dealing with the histories of four or five families from a country town who had migrated . . . to various cities of the South and the Midwest. . . . I wanted to present these families—both Negro and white—living a modern urban life while continuing to be aware of their old identities and relationships. I wanted to give the reader the impression that every character carried in his head a map of that simple country town while going about his life in the complex city . . . to show, in fact, how old patterns, for good or bad, continued to dominate many aspects of these people's lives.

But the old relationships and patterns of small-town agrarian values are stifled or obliterated by the stresses of contemporary urban life. The basic contrasts between orderly past and disordered present are effectively presented in "Their Losses." Three women originally from Thornton—two unworldly spinsters and a sophisticated married woman who had left Thornton to marry a Memphis Jew—come together briefly on a train trip to Memphis. If any affection or understanding ever existed among them, it has died along with the gracious old towns of the past which had once flourished between Grand Junction and Memphis and which to one of the spinsters had been symbols of a "prosperous and civilized" way of life. Now the women have nothing in common, and as the train approaches its destination we know that each will continue to go her own way, alone, alienated, and lost.

Most of Mr. Taylor's characters are similarly unable to escape from or forget the past; at the same time, they are not able to live very comfortably in the present. If in comparison to the world of much recent American fiction Peter Taylor's world is a relatively tranquil one, it is nevertheless a singularly cheerless one. Though it would be an over-simplification to label him either an optimist or a pessimist, his vision is extremely austere, increasingly so, it seems to me, as his career has developed and deepened.

Though some of his characters are treated with affection and sympathy—notably the kind of sensitive, honorable, and patiently suffering middle-aged women exemplified by the mother of "The Long Fourth" or perhaps his best known single character, Mrs. Lovell, from "A Wife of Nashville"—the author usually views his people from afar, as it were; there is little warmth in his work. A common grayness, if I may borrow from Browning, covers rather than silvers his individual landscapes.

To be sure, there are more "nice" people than "bad" ones in Peter Taylor's stories, but they are more uncomfortable, in the final analysis, than comfortable in the roles in which they are cast. A recurring type is the middle-aged lawyer of "Guests," from the author's third volume of stories, *Happy Families Are All Alike*, 1959. After a curious kind of fusing of identity with an older country cousin, the lawyer mourns the too-quickly vanishing past:

You buried yourself alive on that farm of yours, I buried myself in my work here. But something in the life out there didn't satisfy you the way it should. The country wasn't itself any more. And something was wrong for me here. By 'country' we mean the old world, don't we, Cousin Johnny—the old ways, the old life, where people had real grandfathers and real children, and where love was something that could endure the light of day—something real, not merely a hand one holds in the dark so that sleep will come. Our trouble was, Cousin Johnny, we were lost without our old realities. We couldn't discover what it is people keep alive for without them. Surely there must be something. Other people seem to know some reason why it is better to be alive than dead this April morning. I will have to find it out. There must be something.

Not all of the author's characters are treated as kindly as such essentially gentle people as this lawyer. Uncle Andrew of "A Friend and Protector," also from *Happy Families Are All Alike*, is a genial cotton broker. Like the other *Thornton* people he has moved to the city, in this case Memphis. He is a genial man but he possesses a certain hateful spirit, too. When Jesse, the family servant, finally falls apart in what is probably the most savage and violent scene that Peter Taylor ever wrote, the youthful narrator finally realizes that all of them—his Uncle Andrew and his Aunt Margaret and he himself—are not only responsible but that old Jesse's ruined life is also the story of their "pathetically unruined" lives. Though the "kind and gentle" aunt will never completely recover from the shock, perhaps unknowingly she wanted to see Jesse as he was on that hideous morning, an animal crouching behind a desk. Such revelations were not popular twenty years ago, they are not popular now, but I am inclined to think that had he never written another story directly concerned with black-white relations, Mr. Taylor would be remembered for this story alone.

Uncle Andrew, though, is a paragon of virtue compared with the really ugly young father of "At the Drugstore," from *Miss Leonora When Last Seen, and Fifteen Other Stories*, 1963. Home to Tennessee with his "pretty wife and two little sons" for a brief family reunion, Matt Donelson goes to the drugstore to buy some shaving lotion. He remembers the nasty tricks his Country Day classmates used to play on the old druggist, tricks Matt himself did not participate in because he "had always been a little timid, a little too well brought up, to have any part in them." He grossly patronizes the old druggist, is rude to the druggist's son, and is finally in effect ordered out of the store. On the way home, he is appalled at his behaviour—

Dressmaker

A sun parlor sunny with exiled angels
Dancing on the pincushions:
They have waited too long to carry you home.

They have waited too long, you say
As the pinking shears rip through linen
Like pincers tearing flesh.
You are tired: a martyr
Cast into a den of crabs,
Ripped like cloth.

Yet Jesus saves.
He is thin wire and diamond,
Threader that tears the coarsest twine
Through the difficult gates.
You are witness to it—

Who are so thin no needle's eye
Will bar your entrance there.

—CORNELIA EMERSON

why, he reflects, he "even had his right fist tightened and was ready to fight . . . if necessary to protect the old druggist." This, of course, is a complete perversion of the actual truth; by the time he approaches home, Matt knows that "he had gone to the drugstore on purpose . . . he had planned the whole adventure before he ever left New York. It had been intended to satisfy some passing and unnamed need." Supremely smug and self-satisfied, he plays at breakfast the role of happy and benevolent pater familias. He is a bad man and a weak one. His "triumph" is a defeat, a wry reversal of the idea of seek the truth and the truth will set you free.

Vying with Matt Donelson for the dubious title of Peter Taylor's least admirable character is the servant-baiting, wife-betraying husband of "Cookie," from *The Widows of Thornton*. More in the author's accustomed vein is the wife of "The Elect," one of the five previously uncollected—and I assume most recent—stories included here. Judge Larwell is governor-elect of his state. Once again, his wife can "enjoy the dignity of being Mrs. Larwell and not Nell Larwell, as the newspapers—opposition and otherwise" had insisted during the campaign. A woman of background, of refinement and taste, Mrs. Larwell loves her husband; "he was her life". Yet in the closing moments of the day of victory celebration, she feels a sudden "flash of hatred for him," the epiphany which reveals to the reader the true contours of the landscape of her life: Judge Larwell has changed, and she has changed, and their lives will be changed.

So, too, with the characters in the other hitherto uncollected stories. "First Heat" involves only a few hours in the lives of a member of a state legislature, waiting in a hotel room for his wife to attend the Governor's Ball that evening. As the slow moments tick by, we learn a great deal about the man lying on the hotel bed—and of his wife, enough to prepare us for the pitiless revelations which lay bare the meaninglessness of their lives together. Similarly, too, the slow stripping away of protective veneers of the professor-protagonist of "Dean of Men." Far from the noble educator he thinks himself to be, the Dean is a self-righteous betrayer of others and an unwitting self-betrayer, a stranger to himself and to the son to whom he addresses his long, embarrassing, and painful soliloquy of self-justification.

Humor, obviously, is not Mr. Taylor's concern: his readers may smile from time to time, but they seldom find themselves laughing. "Reservations, A Love Story," from *Miss Leonora When Last Seen*, wobbles precariously but successfully between farce and comedy. As in so many of his stories, the author skillfully counterpoints weeks and months of past time with a few hours of elapsing chronological time. Franny, from a "good" Southern family, has just married a young man from California. Miles thinks of his bride as "beautifully innocent and provincial," the "vivacious, unaffected, ingenuous little thing" he had met a year ago at a "big debut party." Of course she is quite the opposite as is made abundantly clear during the first few hours of their wedding night, hours climaxed by Franny's accidentally being locked in the bathroom. But beneath the bantering and the bedroom-farce sort of thing, the story is tart with an almost Thackerayan mixture of affection and contempt, humour and austerity, pathos and irony. "They believe," we are told when the young couple are toasting each other with champagne following Franny's escape from the bathroom:

They believed, really and truly, that neither of them would ever deceive or mistrust the other again. Silently they were toasting their own bliss and happiness, confident that it would never again be shadowed by the irrelevances of the different circumstances of their upbringings or by the possibly impure and selfish motives that had helped to bring them together.

"Mrs. Billingsby's Wine" is similarly light in tone, but sharp in its overtones. Shirley Barnes pays a call on the "well-fixed Mrs. Billingsby" at her home in the "old part of Memphis," quite unlike the nouveau section where Shirley and her dentist husband live. All are originally from the same small town but from very different social backgrounds, as Mrs. Billingsby constantly reminds Shirley. In a tight, deftly-drawn vignette, sharp with comedy, the two are presented in an utterly silly and meaningless contest from which neither emerges the winner.

In a seldom-remembered comment in his famous essay on Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, Edgar Allan Poe stated that the short story was a literary form which placed demands upon the reader commensurate with those placed upon the author; it demanded of the reader an art "kindred" to that of its creator. As the short story became increasingly sophisticated in subject matter and technique, Poe's

Peter Taylor

Peter H. Taylor, born in Trenton, Tennessee in 1919, was educated at Vanderbilt University, Southwestern at Memphis, and Kenyon College. He has taught at the latter as well as at the University of North Carolina, Oxford, and Harvard. A recipient of numerous awards and honors, Mr. Taylor has also been granted Guggenheim, Fulbright, and Ford Foundation fellowships. He received first prize in the 1959 O. Henry Memorial Awards and was given the Ohioana Book Award a year later. He is now Professor of English at the University of Virginia.

Mr. Taylor's works include novels, short stories, and plays, and he has been equally praised for his writings in each field. Morgan Blum, in his rather extensive comments concerning Taylor says, "Mr. Taylor has, from the beginning of his career, been able to imagine with such great verisimilitude people very different from himself in every way . . . he has the ability to see in every act a man or woman performs some expression of that being's total history . . ."

Mr. Taylor is married to Eleanor Ross, a poet, and they have two children.

—LEILA M. DAVIS

remark became increasingly relevant. It is particularly relevant in terms of the short stories of Peter Taylor. The reader who thinks of the short story as a vehicle for dramatic external action, narrative excitement, an entertaining or controversial story line, a vehicle for passion and violence, will either have to seek elsewhere or modify his standards. The drama of Peter Taylor's stories tends to be internal. It exists in and flows from the inner lives of his people, inner lives which are only occasionally revealed in terms of dramatic external events or incidents. Character, indeed, *is* the story. The careful and knowing explorations of the nuances of a situation, the interrelationships of individuals, the revelation, usually quiet, of the essence of non-exceptional human beings confronted with non-exceptional situations replaces in Mr. Taylor's stories the place of plot-as-such. The reader must approach such stories on the author's own terms, not his own.

Within his self-imposed boundaries—limitations or weaknesses, some readers will find them—Mr. Taylor works quietly, surely, and effectively. The success of his fiction is the triumph of moderation. He is traditional, indeed conventional, in method, whether he is leisurely exploring the bypaths surrounding the heart of a family relationship, his most characteristic mode, or compressing in a few sharply-etched minutes the essentials of a situation and the people involved in it. Writing in prose which is characterized by simplicity and purity, he goes to the heart of universal personal and group relationships: why do human individuals act as they do, how does one's past effect his present, what are the relationships between an individual's responsibilities to himself, to his family, to the peculiar segment of society in which he finds himself? Such situations Peter Taylor explores with insight and understanding; it is difficult to think of any writer since James who depicts the nuances of such relationships more successfully.

Books by Peter Taylor

A LONG FOURTH AND OTHER STORIES

New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948.
 Toronto: McLeod, 1948.
 London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949.

A WOMAN OF MEANS

New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1950.
 Toronto: McLeod, 1950.
 London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950.

THE WIDOWS OF THORNTON

New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1954.

TENNESSEE DAY IN ST. LOUIS

New York: Random House, 1957.
 Toronto: Random House, 1957.

HAPPY FAMILIES ARE ALL ALIKE

New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1959.
 Toronto: McLeod, 1959.
 London: Macmillan, 1960.
 Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1962. (pa.)

MISS LEONORA WHEN LAST SEEN

New York: Obolensky, 1963.
 Toronto: McLeod, 1963.

THE COLLECTED SHORT STORIES OF PETER TAYLOR

New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969.
 Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 1969.

—ANNE GRAUER

The talkative old gentleman of "There" is referred to by another character as telling stories in "what seemed a mixture of masculine frankness and almost feminine gossipiness." To a degree, but only to a degree, this might be applied to the method of some of Mr. Taylor's stories. Writing about some of his earlier stories years ago, I commented that occasionally Mr. Taylor showed an inclination to meander down the garden path which sometimes led to the contemplation of trivia or an almost feminine concern with the subtleties of a character or a situation. I am less sure of the validity of that statement today than when I wrote it. Certainly there is nothing soft or *effeminate* about anything Mr. Taylor ever wrote. He shuns excess. His probing of a situation is delicate. He possesses an almost neo-classical distaste for excess, for the sensational, for the vulgar. Because of this he has more than once been referred to as a "gentle" writer. Nothing, it seems to me, could be more wide of the mark. His method may be "gentle," if a respect for words and form and the art of fiction and the art of human life and a distaste for four-letter words and a refusal to wallow in detailed clinical descriptions of basic bodily functions be considered gentle. But there exists at the center of his vision a hard and admirable toughness, what earlier I have fumblingly called austerity,

On the Road to the Town Dump

Wallace Stevens, you would love my new Ford pickup.
 Blue, it hauls wood, my house's refuse, dangerously
 laughing children, all assaulting the literal
 air.

In its small way it divides the real, corresponds
 to particular portables.

Up front my pineapple FM sings Pascagoula, the steppes,
 a magnificent convergence of our tunk-a-tunk-tunk from
 Nashville to Carnegie.

The dash-board lights harbor mystery, winged elements
 straining beyond me, an accelerated metaphor of
 horsepower while

Under my feet silica of several historical journeys—
 cigar butts, a leaf, straw, bright gum-wrappers.

Inescapable soil: by the brake pedal, my sad nightingale,
 brown earth rolling under.

Still, you would have loved my blue pickup, most plural,
 my saddest guitar.

—MARION MONTGOMERY

which is as far removed from "gentleness" as can be imagined. The world he has created is a limited one, particularly when one contemplates the three violent decades in which these un-violent stories were created. Were the stories of Peter Taylor destined to be the only surviving testimonials by which future historians were to judge the years from 1940 to 1970, how different their picture would be from the reality! A world of tensions, and loneliness, and occasional injustice, and more than a few betrayals, and some disappointments, these future historians might say, but a world in which, potentially at any rate, human life was respected, a world in which order and decency and decorum and a sense of responsibility and the value of love were held in high esteem. A pretty good world after all.

If this be a weakness, then these stories are weak.

But I am inclined to believe that this is a strength, not a weakness. No one *really* understands his own times, or himself, or the shifting manners and mores, or his family, or anything else for that matter, I guess. But I'd like to hope, and when I'm reading Peter Taylor's stories I'm inclined to believe, that his fiction is no less accurate a reflection of some of the basic aspects of our times than the picture produced by the apostles of doom, destruction, and devastation.

—WILLIAM PEDEN

Smorgasbord

I think of Captain Cook and the merry Polynesians
Who clubbed him down
And not long afterward feasted on rump steak
Done brown.

On Livingston in Africa, stripped of his spectacles
And dumped into the melting pot.
Native informants, still alert, report he made a toughish dish
Even when hot.

The female Captain Kyd (rumored as weighing a succulent
Three hundred pounds),
Basted with her bra and panties on, ended in thick-lipped
Smacking sounds.

The table spread before me has trays and bellied pots
And fulfilled tureens of food
For the crewcut Army couple on vacation with their
Crewcut brood.

Pastrami cheek by herring, boiled beef with bullion
Butts, cadwallador in slices (rare),
Pimientoes strewn on salad, swordfish with its sword, and
Hot jugged hare.

The fat salesman from New Jersey, his raunchy Edna wife,
The blue-haired sisters from Seattle,
The old farmer with his flock of cawing children—
All do battle.

Elbowing one another, they eat even as they heap their plate
And I think of how Cook and Livingston and blub
Annie helped the heathen to celebrate.

—CARL BODE

Leaf Leaving

One lit match and there they go.

To jump into that

Would be death.

But we are all sane people here.
Here is where
We fight it off
With rakes.

We keep it at bay.

It would mean death.

So

Soon,
Only the white ash is left.

—LEON STOKESBURY

The Owl

The owl opens his eyes.
Dim outlines fuzz the sky—
The calm animals sleep,
Alone, crouched in dreams
Where small sounds
Break like leaves.
The owl opens his eyes.
He knows this is useless,
Still,
He questions the dark.

—STEVE MORRIS

The Ecologist

for Gary Snyder, April 1969

Like a bearded obelisk
he has the markings
of two worlds:
a parchment face
fresh from a tribal dance
with typhoon winds
and kiln fires,
eyes crinkled in a Buddha smile,
freckles old with Huckleberry Finn,
and ribs elbowing out
like an eager Adam
lonely from making love
to the mountain air—
his voice fills the lines with bronze
the spaces in between with April,
and his pack is always ready.

—GAR BETHEL

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