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EDITOR'S NOTE

Interviewed by J.H.E. Paine, Gainesville, Florida, April, 1986, First published in JSSE n°9, 1987.

- 1 Peter Taylor was born in 1917 in Trenton, Tennessee, a small town in the western part of the state. He was reared in that rural community and was exposed as well to the burgeoning cities of Nashville, Memphis, and St. Louis, Missouri. He attended Vanderbilt University in Nashville and Southwestern at Memphis before finishing his undergraduate degree at Kenyon College in Ohio, where John Crowe Ransom was his mentor and where he published his first short story. After serving in the army during World War II, Taylor taught English at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro for twenty-one years, before moving to the University of Virginia, where he retired from the English department faculty in 1982. His teaching career was punctuated by sojourns at the University of Chicago, Kenyon College, Oxford, Harvard, and elsewhere, and by a Fulbright Fellowship to France and numerous other academic awards. Throughout his writing life he has steadily produced volumes of short stories, many of which first appeared in *The New Yorker*, as well as two novels and several plays. *The Old Forest and Other Stories* (1984), a collection which includes many of his best stories from 1941 to 1981, brought the PEN-Faulkner Award, in recognition of Taylor's stature as a major American short-story writer. His short novel *A Summons to Memphis* (1986) has reaped the Ritz-Hemingway Prize and the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, and it also has occasioned thoughtful reviews by Marilynne Robinson in *The New York Times Book Review* and John Updike in *The New Yorker*. Taylor's is an eminently respectable and Southern literary-academic career.
- 2 In his fiction, Taylor sticks closely to the genteel southern social circles in which he grew up - mostly Tennessee people in or oriented to Nashville, Memphis, or St. Louis. Taylor's subject, almost invariably, is the upper-middle-class society of the Upper

South between the wars. His stories of the private lives of the Tennessee bourgeoisie, taken as a whole, build a mosaic of the rifts and tensions which characterized Southern life in this period - the transition from a rural to an urban environment, the conflict of generations, the loss of a spiritual center - while displaying a stylistic grace, an ironic detachment, and a control over material achieved by very few writers of modern fiction.

J.H.E. PAINE: The sempiternal Peter Taylor question. How can a writer recognized as the greatest living short story writer in English be so little known? Your career may in some sense be seen as the success story of the college-boy narrator in "1939" who steps out of the shadow of Henry James. Yet your work seems to be read mostly by relatively narrow circles: general readers who have followed your stories in *The New Yorker* over the years, a small group of scholars concerned with Southern fiction, and what one might call "Tennessee readers" — those with ties to your corner of the world who enjoy seeing their region represented in fiction.

Peter TAYLOR: Well, it occurs to me that one group of readers is omitted there, and they are in a sense the most important group to me. That is my numbers of literary friends when I was growing up and through the years. It's what made it possible for me to go on without minding that I had no big reputation as a writer, but I had such wonderful writers as friends just by chance, I suppose, from the time I was very young, that when my books and stories came out, it was sufficient satisfaction to have letters from them and to have their appreciation. They were just extravagant in their praise, primarily Robert Lowell and Randall Jarrell and Jean Stafford and Allen Tate, too, and Robert Penn Warren. They really constituted all that I cared about as a public; I was perhaps mistaken to do that, but I did and I was hardly aware of how little known I was until a few years ago when people began writing — Jonathan Yardley and others — about how little known I was. I knew that I had no big reputation, but I didn't think about it much. I never lived in the center of literary activities. We've always had a place off somewhere in the country, and our friends, like the Lowells and the Jarrells, would come to visit us, or we'd go to Europe and set up with them. Jarrell and his wife came and set up in Monteagle while we had a cottage there, and we went to Italy with them one summer, and Robert Fitzgerald is a great friend of mine. He would write to me about my stories, and Jarrell and Lowell did, so that I didn't go by the number of reviews in the periodicals and *The New York Times* and such places. I would get pretty good reviews in those places, but I didn't get much sales for my books, ever.

J.P.: You really had a sense of community.

P.T.: Yes, I think there was a sense of literary community in that world we lived in. Tate and Warren and Ransom — I had such confidence in them and they were so enthusiastic about my stories, and I thought they were the greatest living writers, and perhaps they were at that time. It was very lucky for me just to be born in their midst, and then to make friends from the early time. Lowell and I were roommates at Kenyon all the way through, and we remained closest friends as long as he lived. He'd come and stay with us weeks at a time, we were that close and wrote to each other always. I have, you know, hundreds of letters from him and from Stafford and lots of others, and from Jarrell about my work.

Jarrell was so funny about the work of his friends. If you published something he didn't like, he just wouldn't speak to you. We were staying together in a little Riviera town one summer and I passed Randall on the street downtown and he turned away

and wouldn't speak, and I went to his wife Miriam and said, "What have I said to Randall? What's happened?" And she said, "He doesn't like that last story of yours that came out." That seems terrible, but then he would do the same thing to Lowell — we three were friends — and it got so Lowell would say, "Is he speaking to you?" because he'd get that way, but then if you wrote something he liked, he would write you a long letter about it and that's more valuable than twenty reviews — you got a long letter from Jarrell.

I published a story called "Reservations" in *The New Yorker*, and it's a story that I had a lot of fun with because I intentionally tried to give it a perfectly naturalistic surface like a love story and then to load it with Freudian symbols all the way through. Well, it was light, but people thought I'd just become a slick writer; they only saw this surface. It was produced on television as a play and it was translated into French in a magazine called *Madeleine*, a slick ladies' magazine with pages of illustration... But then I was living in London that winter, and I wondered when it came out, "Gosh, people think I've really come to slick and don't get this, don't see what fun I was trying to have." Then I got a ten-page letter from Jarrell, who'd seen every bit of it, interpreting it, liking the story... and what did I care?

And my wife is a good reader. We've always had a literary society we've lived in, sort of off the beaten track. I'm inclined to say that serious writers didn't used to go so much by the National Book Award, all these prizes, and being a best-seller; none of the writers I knew and thought were the best writers had those prizes, and Lytle and Tate and Warren didn't. Well, Warren had earlier *All the King's Men*, but everybody thought, "What's Red doing having a best seller?" But he did it just by accident, and it's a wonderful book, I think.

I'm inclined, as I say, to feel that it was a somewhat different world, but it may be in the first place that I'm just getting old and say that those days were better in some ways, more highbrow, or it may be that the world has changed a good deal in that respect. I do think the world has changed in other arts, too. For instance, there used to be such a great distinction (there still is, of course, but not made often) between popular music and opera and classical — well, we talked of going to concerts and we liked music and still do go to certain concerts, but then when my children began saying to me, "We're going to a concert tonight," I thought, well, that's marvellous, they're going to... then I realized that it would be a great mob out in the park with rock and roll, and they'd call it a concert. And music critics can make things very confusing at times. They write about rock and roll, you know, with this highbrow vocabulary. I think there is a blurring between serious art and popular art, and perhaps they would say I'm an elitist, but I see no reason for there not to be elitist art. Certainly you don't ask scientists to make everything understandable to the whole population. If they had to do that, we wouldn't get very far.

J.P.: Let's talk about your work particularly. Commentators frequently remark on your ability to weave close detail into the fabric of a story. I wonder if you could say something about your use of the *petit fait vrai* — the washed river gravel in the narrator's driveway in "The Gift of the Prodigal," for example?

P.T.: Well, these things are often chance, and it's terrible to give away how chancy it is. That phrase, it sort of delighted me. I liked the way it sounded, "washed river gravel," and it's— I don't know whether you know what is called washed river gravel, in Virginia at least. I never heard of the phrase when I was growing up, but it's this

little brown sandy-colored gravel. It's very genteel-looking, and you get it in driveways of rather elegant houses, and I'd noticed this — in fact I'd wanted some for my driveway, but hadn't ever got round to doing it. I'd always thought, I'm going to get me some of that. But when I got to doing this [story], it seemed just right for that house and for this man to be putting in washed river gravel in his little driveway and having it raked, you know, and cared for so.

As to its symbolic significance — I feel very strongly about the use of symbols and symbolic elements in fiction. I think that symbols are there only to support the story and the effect and the belief, and that when you write a story around a symbol having the symbol more important than the story itself, as some modern stories seem to me to be—in fact, I heard some young writer say, “I've got the story all written, but I've just got to put in the symbols“ — that seems to me perfectly ridiculous. The symbol should come out of the material. It should be part of the naturalism of the story, and then if they have great symbolic feeling, they are wonderfully effective, but I often don't realize what symbols are in my stories until somebody points them out. I wrote a story called “The Walled Garden,” and a friend of mine sent me a whole class's papers on that story—he let some class write an interpretation of “The Walled Garden,” and they all gave it a Freudian interpretation, and I thought it was perfectly marvellous. And I think that if the story works, that's the way it works. That's why it's as powerful as it is, because it has this, but I had no ideal of it when I was writing the story.

I think writing stories is rather like dreaming, and that if you have a certain temperament or sensibility, you'll have an affinity for certain symbols that will make the story have its impact. I resent a lot of the symbolic values in Joyce and other writers. For instance “The Dead“ I think is a wonderful story, a naturalistic story, and I don't deny the interpretations that are put on it, the Christian interpretation on that and on “Araby,” but I just sort of shrug and say, “Yes, that's there,” and I'm sure it helped Joyce write the story maybe, but I think he wrote a good story almost in spite of those instead of because of them. I think that interpretation of “Araby“ about the medieval search for the Grail — I can see it in there, but it's not what makes it a wonderful story. Or in “The Dead,” I don't deny the interpretation of the crucifix, but I think it's fiction, I think it's the last scene when her lover dies out in the rain. I don't deny the symbols — I might, except that if you go through the story and look at the names of the characters, you'll see that it's very suspicious, that they are the right characters — Malins for... Eden, Freddy Malins is the character — from *mal*, you see. Joyce may have done all that, but I don't like that either, names — I try not to get a name that is too significant or symbolic.

When James does it, sometimes I smile (he's one of my great admirations), but I'll say “that bad James, he shouldn't have done that.“ I mean he'll have Mr. New — Mr. Newsome in *The Ambassadors*, he'll have names like that off and on. I'm sure it must have been conscious with him — I don't know, but I don't like it and I think that someone who doesn't ever do that — I don't say he's a greater writer than one who does — is Lawrence. I'm crazy about Lawrence's stories, not about his novels. I like one or two novels, but I think the stories are magnificent. They are stories that are very hard to write; that's the hardest kind of story to write, without having any of the props or crutches or anything like that.

J.P.: That leads me to another question. It's been suggested that you're a nineteenth-century storyteller in the line of Trollope, say, refined through Henry James. This bothered me, when I first saw that formulation for your art, and I wonder if it's...

P.T.: Well, Trollope didn't have the influence on me when I was younger. Naturally in sophomore English I'd read *The Warden* and *Barchester Towers*, but that was the extent of my knowledge of Trollope till much later, and that use of place, I mean as I used Thornton in a not-very-powerful way, but I've used the world that I know, I've probably learned more from Faulkner and Hardy, because Faulkner had an influence on everybody of that generation. As a Southerner you learn from Faulkner; he was in a way the one who taught us how to look at ourselves. And then you looked at yourself as different from him eventually, but still those stories in *These 13* to me are amongst the great stories of the world. I like them much better than the more rhetorical novels and later stories. I like "Was," in *Go Down, Moses*. I like those stories very much. They're the work of genius, but I think "Was" is one of the funniest stories ever written in the world, and I find myself sometimes tempted to steal from it. I think those stories of his are just perfect in *These 13*. I mean "A Rose for Emily" and "That Evening Sun" and those stories. Where did we come to this from? I got off a tangent...

J.P.: Oh, we're talking about people that influenced you.

P.T.: Oh, yes.

J.P.: You've managed to suggest Faulkner, which I hadn't really hit upon in a direct way.

P.T.: But he — we're such different temperaments that our writing has such a different feeling, an attitude toward the South, but you learn where you can learn from other writers who have made use of the context; the context of the stories is very important. If you take "A Rose for Emily" and set it in New York State in 1920, it just wouldn't make any sense at all. Flourishing New York, just as I say. Shaw took a Chekhov play and he set it in prosperous Edwardian England, at the turn of the century, and had a story very much like Chekhov's in Russia where the whole fabric of society was being torn up, everything was failing. The farms were not working properly and so on. Well, it made sense in Chekhov, the context of the story was very significant in the events, in the larger context. And it is there in Faulkner in a country that has been taken over by a greater power on its border, and so we learned that from Faulkner, Southerners always did. Eudora Welty, and I think Flannery O'Connor indirectly through Eudora Welty maybe, learned it and so on.

But then we learned it from Hardy, too. We all read Hardy in school and later, and that had a big effect. But you learn from bad writers as well as good writers. I don't mean bad writers, but very low middle-brow writers. There was one called Margaret Ayre Barnes in the twenties and thirties that wrote books; they were Book-of-the-Month Club, I think. They came to our house and that's how I read them. I suddenly began reading her stories — I had lived in Memphis and St. Louis then, and I suddenly saw — she was writing about Chicago actually — the world she lived in was a subject for fiction, and you could do something with that kind of world. I had the great pleasure of meeting her many years later when I was forty, I guess (I had read them when I was fifteen), and she was an old lady in Chicago. I was teaching at the University of Chicago and I was just by chance taken to lunch with her. It was the greatest pleasure for me to tell her of being acquainted with all her books, and I think she hadn't met anybody in years who was.

But I learned from her use of subject — the world of her stories and interpreting the characters in terms of that world, how the characters affected the world and the world affected the characters. That's to me one of the most interesting observations in life now, seeing people in their context. Other people will find it obnoxious in me sometimes, I mean personally — maybe in stories, too — because I at once begin wanting to know who people were and what they were.

It's immensely interesting to me, all the things that make up people's lives, because it's not just one thing, but there's that maybe dominant thing about growing up in Middle Tennessee and observing them and knowing who they were. I was behind a boy in the chow line once overseas during the war and I heard him talking, and I said, "You're from Tennessee," and he said, "Yes," and I said, "You're from Middle Tennessee." He said, "Yes." I said, "You're from Davidson County." That's the sort of observation that I loved learning from other writers. Now you didn't learn that from Chekhov or from James so much, though I maintain that if one thing is true in art almost surely the opposite is true; that is, that if you say a writer is of the Flaubertian school, then he must write about what he knows and the details of his life and write about character in the right context with who he is. But you can do the reverse — you see, James and Hemingway wrote about Americans in Europe, but that same significance is important. James's Americans in the European background as they so often are — it means so much more than that; if it were just that, it would just be history or something, but it's puritanism against catholicism, and then the characters shape up that way, and Hemingway — it is so significant that his characters *are* abroad when they are abroad.

J.P.: There's still a context there.

P.T.: Yes, there's a context there. It's the poetry of it in a way. You can say so much more by these coincidences of the character and the context.

J.P.: Let me focus a little bit on a slightly different subject. I could hardly help notice in your work — this is not the case in the work of other prominent Southern writers — that religion doesn't seem to play a very direct role. The one story I find it in is "The Hand of Emmagene," where fundamentalist ideology is part of the title character's neurosis, but really it's her personality that's the center of interest, I think, not her particular kind of faith, so why does religion...?

P.T.: But that's implied in her faith. You know, there's the business about her going off to the far side of Nashville to go to the church, to her denomination and how they were always changing, breaking off and going in her denomination to different sections, spawning new churches, and that is implied there, but you're right, it doesn't appear and it's very easy for me to sit up here after the fact and give reasons, but it is perfectly true that I grew up in a family and really a class of people maybe who were not religious and for whom there had been great battles of religion in the past, as there had been great battles of politics.

There were two subjects at our dinnertable that were not allowed to be discussed, and they were politics and religion, because my grandfather on one side had married three times and each one of a different denomination — the first Presbyterian, the second Episcopalian, the third Methodist — and there were battles over it, and he was divorced, which was a great scandal, from his second wife, who wanted to send his children away to Sewanee Military and to an Episcopal girls' school. And there were very ugly things about it, and then on my father's side they had been Roman

Catholics and had left and become Baptists, but on their deathbeds — really my father called a Roman Catholic priest, this was after 100 years of being [Baptist] — they had come from Maryland down to North Carolina, and one of them left the church and went and founded a Baptist school in South Carolina, Furman, and then the same man came on — his father never spoke to him again because he left the Catholic church — and then he went and was president of the University of Alabama, and then some of his brothers went to Tennessee, and they were violent about religion. One of my family who didn't believe in graven images and all her money to the church in Rome.

So we had those backgrounds on both sides, but we went to church, we went to the nearest Sunday school whatever it was. There were more Methodists in West Tennessee and Presbyterians and Episcopalians. I went to Episcopal schools, but at home my father loved to argue religion, and I saw him crucify members of the family who were Episcopalians especially. I've often thought of writing stories about religion. I know a good deal about it and the Methodist church and the Presbyterian and Episcopal churches and the Baptists some, too, because we had aunts who were strict Baptists. My mother had notes she kept from an aunt who had been Roman Catholic and became Baptist, and she had been invited to the baptism, to the christening, of my oldest sister, and she wrote back, "Thank you for your invitation, but I'm not inclined to witness the barbarous ritual of infant baptism." So you see the sort of thing that was impious, and I wrote one story that was never put in a book... called "Tom Tell Him," and it's based on several episodes. For one, there was a baptismal font in the Episcopal church in Trenton, and my great grandfather had given the land for the church. But the Episcopal flock had shrunk to near zero and they all had to go across the county to another Episcopalian church, and so the church fell into disuse and was about to fall down. They got a man to come and tear it down, and he was told he could have everything in it. He took the baptismal font and set it up in his side yard as a bird bath, and so then the whole town went up in arms.

J.P.: You've studied the drama and you've published a number of plays in addition to your short stories. Could you say just a bit about what prompted you to turn to this second literary vocation?

P.T.: I wanted to write plays before I wrote stories. I have some very crude things I wrote very young. I'm still working on plays right now. I love to have my plays produced and to go and work with them and rewrite them and everything. I've done it at colleges and at the Barter Theatre in Virginia. I've written a volume of one-act plays, *Presences*, and I enjoyed doing that very much and have been to productions of them at colleges.

I had a very happy situation for a while at Kenyon. The man who directed the theater there for years was the best director of that sort I've ever known. He did all my plays as I wrote them, and that's what every playwright needs, somebody who's going to give your play a production right away. He did these one act plays and he did "A Stand in the Mountains," "Tennessee Day in St. Louis," and well, several one-act plays. I'm writing a trilogy, two other plays to go along with "A Stand in the Mountains." They all take place in something I call Allen Mountain, like Monteagle. And so my interest goes on.

J.P.: Did they influence the way you wrote your short stories or the way you looked at the short story?

P.T.: Well, of course I think that the short story is much closer to the play than it is to the novel, that it's a dramatically compressed literary form, and I've pointed out that it's much more natural to go into a play than to go into a novel, generally speaking, for short story writers, and yet short-story writers are pushed into writing novels by the market. Publishers insist.

I had a battle about my book of stories, *The Old Forest*. Knopf and Farrar, Straus refused to print it — they're sorry now, I'm happy to say — until I gave them a novel first; it's a way of prizing a novel out of you... Eudora Welty, it's her stories that are wonderful. Her long novel is not nearly as good as the stories in my opinion, however good it is. And Katherine Anne Porter's *Ship of Fools* is not as good as her stories. Of course, as Lowell said about that, if anybody but Katherine Anne had written that novel we would think it was pretty good, but the stories are so much better. And then J.F. Powers, whom I admire immensely, wrote one novel, under pressure, and it was a good novel, but it was not the inspired thing that some of his stories are.

J.P.: It's an endangered breed. Well, let me ask you something about *The New Yorker*. Many of your stories were published in *The New Yorker*. People started identifying you as a *New Yorker* writer. Nobody really likes to be categorized like this. How do you react to being called a "*New Yorker* writer?"

P.T.: I wouldn't have liked to be a *Partisan Review* writer or an *Esquire* writer or any other category you put on a writer, but I do admire and respect *The New Yorker* a lot. Of course, when you talk about *The New Yorker*, it has not been the same magazine all these years. It is in some respects, but there've been different editors. They've had continuity in the principal editor, but the fiction editors have changed, and you can trace the differences in the stories to the different fiction editors that were there. When Katherine White was editor — that was in the early fifties — I think they had marvellous short-story writers: J.F. Powers, Eudora Welty, Mary McCarthy, Salinger, all those writers and others, Malamud I think, all the writers who were there — I include myself in that bunch — at that period the fiction in *The New Yorker* was the best fiction we've seen in a magazine in a long time. Before that, the earlier *New Yorker* story writers were Dorothy Parker and others — they wrote lightweight stories relatively — humorous stories and not very important as literary history goes. Then after Katherine White there were other editors, and they stopped printing Eudora Welty and all those writers.

In fact, Jean Stafford is another one of those. We were very good friends, and she would say that she was going start a club of *New Yorker* rejectees because they rejected a lot of us. And so I asked to be released from my first-reader's agreement with them. But then after several years I began writing these other stories, and Eleanor urged me to send them to *The New Yorker*. I said they were not going to print them, and then suddenly they did, and they've been printing everything since then. So it's the different editors. There is a marvellous person there now, Frances Kiernan, that I like working with. She's edited my last three stories, I think.

J.P.: Do you think *The New Yorker* has had anything other than a positive influence on American fiction?

P.T.: Well, yes it has in a way. You could say it, but I don't think it makes them out as villains. For one thing I think *The New Yorker* is a literary magazine in the sense that

no other big magazine is in this country. They select the stories for the story's sake and love to discover young writers. They've discovered a lot and printed a lot of unknown writers, including Padgett Powell, who I think is a very good young writer. Now we may not agree with their criterion for fiction or for the short story, but they do have one. They don't print names, as I think most of the magazines do, ones that would compete with *The New Yorker*. They'll take a bad story by Saul Bellow or by me maybe, because of the name, and that's not exercising literary judgement, and *The New Yorker* doesn't do that.

And they've had other effects. I think that Jean Stafford was — you can't blame *The New Yorker* for this — but I think she should have been a novelist. She should have written numbers of long novels that she never wrote, because as soon as she began printing stories in *The New Yorker*, she gave herself over to that and wrote short stories for them and for herself. Maybe she would never have written those novels. I thought she was going to be sort of another Thomas Mann in this country from her early work.

They had some effect, maybe, because they encouraged a certain side of my stories and I may have just gotten carried away... One time when I had a first-reading agreement with them, I think I had five stories. If you had four stories in the period of a year, you got 15 % more money for everything retroactively, and they paid just enormously, it is the only magazine that's really paid writers the money they made, because the writers owned it. If you wrote six, you got 25 % more. Well, one year they wrote me that if I wrote one more before the fifteenth of June, I would have six stories during the period of twelve months and I would get 25 % more for all of them. So I was young and full of energy. I went over to the college to my office and locked myself up for a couple of weeks and wrote a story that I sent to them and that they took. Well, my conscience is such that I was a little ashamed that I could just turn it out if I could now sit down and write, and I thought of just the material to put in it. I have never put that story in a book. It is buried. I've had people ask me about it, but I'm so prejudiced against it...

But generally speaking, I think *The New Yorker* encourages writers. Another thing. I felt so guilty about making so much money from *The New Yorker* for a few years when I was still young and idealistic, I was determined to spend all the money as I made it, and that's why we went to Europe every year for about five years.

J.P.: Let me ask you something else. It has to do with Southern fiction. There are lots of rumors about the demise of Southern fiction. I've heard Reynolds Price give it fifty years, and the critic Lewis Lawson has said that "Southern fiction must continue to fight its way toward a vision of life made vital by Christianity or die." What would you say is the future of Southern fiction?

P.T.: Well, it depends of course on so many things. I can't predict what's going to happen, how completely plasticized we're all going to become and how much we're going to all be just alike, but I see young writers now in the South writing stories that reveal enormous talent for fiction. I've noticed that in recent years a lot of them have come out of the Highland South, more than they used to. Fred Chappell, I think, is a marvellous writer, and there are others that write stories about the mountains. There's a man up in West Virginia who died last year, just a boy, Breece Pancake. He had been a student at Virginia, and he was a very talented and energetic person that

would have been productive. Some people write a story or two and that's it, and nothing's wrong with that, but that's it. He was going to write a lot.

I think that there will be fiction going on in the South as long as people are trying to discover their own identity. That's part of it, they're going to write stories about the world they live in. It won't be the same South that you and I may have known, it'll be a different one, because what we knew was very different from our parents and grandparents.

I wrote one story in which I dealt with this subject matter, and I'd like to do it again, called "Mrs. Billingsby Wine." It is about everybody turning to his own period. In it, Mrs. Billingsby was talking about how wonderful Thornton had been in her day, and the young woman who came there began to resent it because she remembered a Thornton of her youth as so marvellous and she thought of that as the real Thornton. We all do this to some extent.

Then there is language. I object terribly to the use of certain words our children or our young students use. Then I remember hearing my father blast one of my sisters for using the word "guys." "You guys," he said, "that's street language." Now, you know, you don't even think of that.

J.P.: Let me ask you about what has been called the digressive retrospective monologue. I think that's...

P.T.: I think that describes it pretty well. That's exactly what I'm doing right now.

J.P.: You've been praised for using it perhaps better than anyone else in modern fiction, and I think you've almost got a patent on it...

P.T.: Well, your virtues and vices, I think, all come from the same... Sometimes I get so sick of it, and then I think, oh no, that's the way I can do it.

J.P.: I was going to put this together with Robert Tower's saying that your work sometimes defies the concentration of the short story, the brevity that's so typical of the short story. I don't know how you reconcile what might be a naturally novelistic mode of narration with the form of the short story. Could it be because of the Southern storytelling tradition?

P.T.: I think that's some of it, that oral tradition and that I lived in a family of story-tellers. My mother and my grandfather were great raconteurs and anecdotalists, and my father loved so to hear my mother tell stories that he would say over and over, "Tell the one about so-and-so," and the rest of us would have heard it so many times, we would wander off, but my father could just listen endlessly to those stories. They were always told with the same phrases, the same vocabulary that came in at just right moment. A sense of drama would come right then. Then others, too, my Uncle Alf Taylor, who was my mother's great uncle. I have just recently acquired a recording of Uncle Alf—just talking and singing with his sons, and Uncle Alf talking about old Limber his foxhound, and his voice is wonderful, it's pure valley of East Tennessee. He tells some stories about old Limber and quotes the stories a slave had told him, and they sing... oh, I think "Barbara Allen" and some old ballads...

It's partly that, but also it's been one of my interests to see if I can get the effect of a long story, of a novel in a short story suggested by this, and I've consciously done it a lot of the time and enjoyed doing it and not always successfully, I think. Sometimes it's what's wrong with stories, but then sometimes it's worked. After all, Turgenev does it, you know; he's a great one for storytelling that way. I don't know whether I

can point out examples. There's a story called "Old Portraits" of his that I admire very much, and I think you could point out other people who do it, not as much, I bet. I'm sort of obsessed with it, and I think maybe I talk that way and that's why I've fallen into it.

J.P.: I think it helps incorporate the dimension of time into your fiction, and this brings me to "The Old Forest," the story itself and the film that Steven Ross made. You do the voice-over for the film, lending the speaking voice of Peter Taylor to the sixtyish retrospective narrator Nat Ramsey. The film, though it is very well done and faithful to the story, seems to me not to capture fully, even in spite of the voice-over narration which I know is yours, an important dimension of the story, that of time. I wonder if you could react to that.

P.T.: I think that it's a just criticism, but he had to do the story in sixty minutes and under. With more time he could've got that in perhaps, made it visual somehow, and I don't know that it works with my narration. At the very end of the story Nat tells about how time went on and he later went back to school and became a professor and did this and that, and in the story that's sort of woven into the fabric. In the film it's something in addition and it's spoken, and the visual effect of the film is so much greater than any other, I think. The sound, the music, can have a great effect, but the visual is so much stronger. To have got the whole story of the characters and the relation of men and women in the society, whether he could have got all that and this too, I just don't know. I think maybe that if there's a criticism to be made, that's it. But I think that it's an awfully good film the way it is, and much closer to the original than films often are. And for the author to be happy with the adaptation is unusual, I think.

I told you that he and I are going to work on another one, perhaps on the novel I just finished, or perhaps we'll make up a whole new story—that's what he really wants to do I think, and I'd do it just for the hell of it. I've really gotten to look at movies with much more intelligence since I worked on that film.

J.P.: Let's talk some more about "The Old Forest." In it, you mention Proust and the *demimondaines* in that story as part of what I read as ironic commentary on the young Nat Ramsey and his pretensions and then you unmention Proust; that is, old Nat the narrator states that the girls are not *demimondaines* after all, and it struck me that this is one of the really very few times in all your work that you make a direct literary allusion and refer to another author.

P.T.: Well, usually it doesn't seem appropriate either in the characters' minds and therefore in the narrative or in the dialogue, for them to make literary references, because they wouldn't have read things I'd want to refer to. But here these were young girls who would have read Proust, and Nat with his reading Latin and having this side to him, I felt it was possible for it to come into his ken. That's the only justification I can see for it.

J.P.: Are you suggesting the Proustian process of bringing back the past as relevant to this story?

P.T.: I don't think I had that in mind. It's a good idea and I like the idea and it does work that way in the story, but I didn't consciously say that to myself. But I wish I had thought of it. I think it would be reasonable and effective and maybe is suggestive of that now. I'll have to look at it again.

J.P.: Again on this story, I am very interested in the Lee Ann circle of girls. And I wonder to what extent Lee Ann's group may be symbolic. Symbolic of a new order or a new group of relations.

P.T.: Well, that did occur to me and that was one of the things I wanted to suggest in that story, and I felt that it might work with a present-day audience of readers, to make the connection between them and... Today such girls would be legion, and it's amazing how easily Picasso and Matisse and such people's names can be just mentioned now. But I wanted them to suggest that this was the changing of the relationship of the sexes in society and in this world, but I didn't go so far as to press that.

I'm often dealing with that kind of thing. I'm doing it right now with what I'm writing, trying to see how much I can suggest about what the experience of people reading the story long afterward would be, compared to what it would have been at the time, and that to me gives it a greater depth. That's what's fun about it. I told you about this novel taking place on the train in 1915, and then I am planning whole sections in the 1970's and then going back 100 years before that. One of the things on the train, I won't go on with this, but on this cortege going back to Tennessee, there were just the three sisters in one drawing room and a widow stepmother and an aunt in the other drawing room on two pullman cars, and in between there are all the men, and they're all different kinds of men, relatives, and some of them getting drunk... these women locked in these rooms, and then suddenly having to go up and sit with the body in the baggage car—so with all these possibilities, that's what marvellous to your imagination. You wonder what is this relationship with these women, their isolation and all, and even the three women who are young married women in their twenties and their husbands...

J.P.: You're always dealing with the complications of male-female relations.

P.T.: Isn't everybody?

J.P.: Well, yes. What strikes me about your stories over and over is that the women characters seem to get very special care, more care overall than maybe the male characters, they're more sensitively drawn. I think of Miss Leonora, I think of Shirley, I think certainly of Caroline Braxley and Lee Ann. Male characters... they're oafs or they're indecisive, they vascillate, sometimes they're even neurotic.

P.T.: That's exactly the way I'm writing about these characters in this new novel now. There's a boy in love with the three sisters, and then you see him in the 1970's and he is an old man and he's never married and he's very peculiar.

J.P.: Why are women in the psychological and often moral ascendancy over men in your fiction?

P.T.: Of course, probably I really think they are always, but I think in the South particularly, and particularly the South that I knew growing up; there were old ladies always (I've told you my father was a lawyer and he always had a lot of old ladies whose estates he was looking after) around the house staying with us.

After the Civil War for a long time the woman in many cases was the dominant member of the house. The husbands didn't know what to do. For the men it wasn't the same; there wasn't the authority. They still had a great deal, but I knew more old ladies who spoke with authority than I did old gentlemen, and who were powerful figures. I knew such ladies everywhere and I'm sure they existed in the rest of the South, and to some extent it was a universal thing all over the world in the old days,

the spinster aunts who perhaps had a little money and were running things and everybody was hoping to inherit their money and all that.

J.P.: While the men turned their...

P.T.: There was nothing to do for the men for a long time. There were some who did well, of course, who went on, but there were a great many from old farming families who'd had a good deal of wealth and they became traveling men for hardware companies out of Louisville and that sort of thing, and the women stayed at home and tried to live as they'd always lived. That's a picture that's partly fanciful, but it's partly true. I don't know whether that's the main thing, but I admired women a great deal, and I loved these older women; I thought they were perfectly marvellous—I did some uncles, too, but the women more than that. I had a family of so many women. There were lots of daughters and cousins who would all be in the house a great deal of the time, and I had two older sisters and my mother and my mother's sisters and all this, but everybody to some extent had this.

J.P.: At the end of "The Old Forest" Caroline is... Because she has pride of power, she's able to give Nat freedom later; that is, he's able to renounce his career in cotton and take up a much more modest life as an academic and go through graduate school and so on. It is still Nat who makes the decision that changes their lives and yet it's Caroline...

P.T.: Caroline is willing to go along, as I felt so many women wouldn't have been. I have great sympathy with a lot of my friends in Memphis of my generation then who are so blocked in Memphis that they can't break, but they would love to get away and live a different life. There's something about it, they can't do it, and often it's the wife who won't allow them to do it, I think.

J.P.: Even in my generation, I have heard of couples where the wife, after being away for a time, has put her foot down and said, "We're going back to Memphis."

P.T.: That's the story. It's the story of Memphis's life. They can't leave it—and there are people, not just from Memphis, even more people from Mississippi and West Tennessee, from the peripheral towns and areas in Arkansas, to whom Memphis is the center of the world; they are even more inseparable. Memphis is a very isolated spot, more than Nashville in a way. The people don't dare leave it. They don't have connections in other places. If they leave there, they're nobody and if they stay in Memphis at least they're somebody in Memphis.

Of course every place in the world that you live, people from other places have their own types and feel that they are unique, but for me the reason that I'm not just an old codger sitting up gossiping as some of my friends say, is that I've found in it—I must tell you this because I would say it to any other writer, too—I brought to it a feeling about those differences, and they were differences perhaps within me, and there's my experience as a very young person going to both places and then hearing my parents talk about these things. They just talked about it all the time, the differences between Nashville and Memphis, and for me it mean this conflict and these differences, and in my novel [*A Summons to Memphis*] I say Nashville was the past and Memphis was the present for them. So it's what you make of these things as a writer. You can live in Sanduskey, Ohio, or you can live in upstate New York. If you have the insights and the luck and the temperament, you make up worlds and they are not the real worlds, not the real Memphis or the real Nashville but they are what they represent for me and what they did represent for me.

J.P.: Let me ask you about "Je Suis Perdu" because it's one of my favorite stories.

P.T.: Well, I'm so glad. It's one of my favorites, and it was one of Jarrell's very favorites.

J.P.: Readers sometimes complain about irony, Peter Taylor irony, and you've said practically any short story has to be ironic. But in this story, which I think is one of your most moving, in "Je Suis Perdu," the ironic distance that I keep looking for is attenuated and maybe it's not even there.

P.T.: Well it's not in the sense that it is in the others, and it is much more autobiographical. Usually the narrator or the principal character in my stories I'm thinking of as somebody else, this somebody I've known or put in. I dissociate myself from it because it's more fun to write it that way. But in this it was my children and my wife and it's almost precisely as it happened. But after I had thought about it, I looked for irony in it and... When we first arrived in Paris—I was on a Fulbright that year—there was a big dinner for the Fulbrights held at the University of Paris. I met a man there whom I liked. We met him and his wife and his children. He was an historian. He was my age or younger, and he was there writing his thesis. It was to be on the bridges built in France in the reign of Louis XIV. Is that in the story, do you remember?

J.P.: I don't think that made it into the story.

P.T.: But that was what he was doing, and it seemed to me such a very special scholarly little subject there to be working on. I was there as a writer to do research, allegedly, on Southerners who had come to Paris during the Civil War and then wouldn't leave.

J.P.: So you really were there to do that, like the narrator in the story...?

P.T.: Is that what he says he was there for? Oh, yes, I guess I changed it to that. The narrator was there as an historian; I was going to write some fiction about it. And so that was really what my plan was, but I found nothing in Paris that wasn't in the library at home, though I did meet some people, descendants of those people, but I just had a wonderful time in Paris, doing other things and writing furiously. At any rate, I met this young man and his wife and they had two children, maybe about the age of ours, and it seemed to me he was so typical of the young academic Fulbright scholar, and very attractive they were in every way, very genteel, and so I sort of took him over and to some extent that's supposed to be the whole thing — his attitude toward himself. There's a little irony there, but essentially you take his experience directly at the end when he says, "after I found things that I loved even more than myself."

I'm trying to think now of other stories where there's not so much irony. They would be when they're autobiographical... what about "Rain in the Heart?" It's the one about the soldier who meets the strange girl and then goes home to his wife, and that again is a very autobiographical story. That whole conversation with that girl — I just ran home and wrote it all down, and the situation there was all very real during the war. I have a few stories like that. I don't think there's any of the irony about genteel people or anything like that.

J.P.: You've said a word or two about what you're working on now. Would you like to say something more, first about *A Summons to Memphis*?

P.T.: Well, it began as a long story and it got like Topsy, it just grew and grew. Everything we've said keeps reminding me of it today because it's about a family in Nashville that moved to Memphis, and the children all are at an age when the changes are ruinous to them almost, or it seems so to the narrator. It's from Nashville to Memphis they move, and I use those two cities to mean different things in the story. Then, of course, a lot of it is autobiographical, all stories are, but it doesn't matter. To make material over into a story, none of the characters can remain the characters they were in life and it's not making judgements on anybody, I hope.

It's a story concerned with old people in our society and what becomes of them. It's about an old man whose children try to prevent his marrying again when he's eighty, and it's not because of the money really, and it's not because of the grandchildren. There are no grandchildren, there is no land. I say at one point in it that Memphis is a land-oriented city, that everybody owns some land, that's partly the thing that people ought to be keeping for the children, but it's none of those reasons. But then what is it? That's the mystery of the story — Why are they doing this? But then the story wanders about back into their past life and how he behaved in certain moments, and so on. It was a great satisfaction to me to write it, and I want to see if I can write another that long. That's what I'm doing right now..

J.P.: So the piece that you're doing now is at least a long short story?

P.T.: Yes, at least a very long short story and probably as long as a short novel.

J.P.: Have you got a title for it?

P.T.: The title I'm using now is "The Senator's Daughters" or "The Daughter of the Senator." I may get a better tick. That's not very original, and in fact, it's all going to be capsuled in a train journey, and if I could get something about that in there... Frank O'Connor has a wonderful story called "In the Train." That's not the title I'm using, but that might be interesting. Titles are just things to play with when you're writing the story. Every now and then I'll just list all the possibilities and if the theme changes in my mind, I'll change the title.

J.P.: But large chunks of it will happen on the train from Washington?

P.T.: The beginning... and I think maybe the end will be on the train, but in the course of the journey the narrator, who is not on the train but has heard about this all his life from members of the family, does know other things, and he wanders and tells about things that happened earlier and later. The characters are drawn that way with their whole life stories, what happens to the three sisters, to their husbands, their marriage, the sort of lives they lived, and what happens to the young man that was really in love with all three of them. And then — I don't know that it will end this way, but this will be in it, I think. The old man goes to a party in Washington that the narrator also goes to, given by a niece who's now married to a senator. It's not going to be my niece or anything, though I have a niece who is married to a senator. But you see those things are suggestive and I'm not at all thinking of their personalities; I'm thinking of their circumstances.

J.P.: You think you have a disenchanted mind? Which values enchantment?

P.T.: That's what Warren says... I'll take anything that Warren says. He must have written that when I was under thirty, in that preface to my book [*A Long Fourth*

and Other Stories, 1948]. But he has so much energy and has done so many wonderful things. To bother to write that. I didn't ask him, my publisher just wrote to him and asked him to do it. He's been such a friend to me...

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