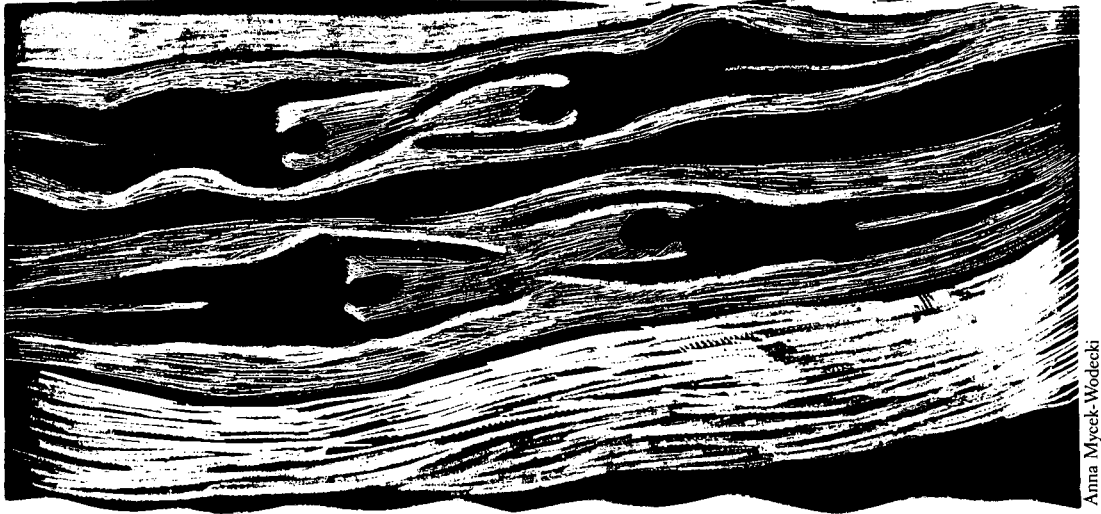


Time and the Tide in the Southern Short Story

by Madison Smartt Bell



Anna Mycek-Wodecki

Perhaps since the War Between the States itself, and certainly since the literary Southern Renaissance became conscious of itself in the 30's and 40's, educated Southerners, and Southern writers especially, have taken their sense of history as a point of pride. Now, as the end of the century approaches, one may be tempted to wonder whether this pride has degenerated into mere vanity—declining from the deadliest of sins to a mere venal one. That special Southern historical sense may have become no more than a conventional piety of a style of Southern literary criticism, which, as the novelist Madison Jones was heard to mutter in the audience of a critical panel five years ago, has long since passed “beyond refinement.”

In any event, the deep sense of history is less likely to be associated with short Southern stories than with big Southern novels: Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha opus, Robert Penn Warren's excursion to the regional past, *Roots* even, or George Garrett's Elizabethan trilogy; those last two works carry a sharpened awareness of history into other regions altogether. Short stories, on the other hand, are not expected to express the long continuum from past into present, although they very well can, and sometimes still do.

The two surviving elder statesmen of the Southern short story, Eudora Welty and Peter Taylor, have moved in quite drastically different directions in their use of time in their work. In this narrow sense, Miss Welty's stories appear to be more conventional, by contemporary standards. The span of time they typically seek to portray is brief: the day, the hour, the moment. Their effect is an immediate effect. Although there are powerful historical currents running through many of Miss Welty's stories, their channels are mostly subterranean.

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So it is with “The Hitch-Hikers,” one of her best (each of her stories is one of her best). The traveling salesman Harris is a desperately dislocated man who can only recognize his condition by contrast to the two tramps he picks up in his car, whose language itself reflects a certainty of identity that Harris can in no way match: “I come down from the hills. . . . We had us owls for chickens and fox for yard dogs but we sung true.” After Harris stops for the night in a hotel, the two tramps quarrel over a scheme to make off with his car, and one of them kills the other by clubbing him with a bottle. What could it mean to a man like Harris?

In his room, Harris lay down on the bed without undressing or turning out the light. He was too tired to sleep. Half blinded by the unshaded bulb he stared at the bare plaster walls and the equally white surface of the mirror above the empty dresser. Presently he got up and turned on the ceiling fan, to create some motion and sound in the room. It was a defective fan which clicked with each revolution, on and on. He lay perfectly still beneath it, with his clothes on, unconsciously breathing in a rhythm related to the beat of the fan.

One would hardly wish to be any nearer a moment than this. Of course it is a distinctly null moment. It is frozen, except for the clocklike sound and movement of the fan, which insists on the story's oppressive proximity to real time.

He could forgive nothing in this evening. But it was too like other evenings, this town was too like other towns, for him to move out of this lying still clothed on the bed, even into comfort or despair. Even the rain: there was often rain, there was often a party, and there had been other violence not of his doing—other fights, not quite so pointless, but fights in his car; fights, unheralded confessions, sudden lovemaking—none of any of this his, not

his to keep, but belonging to the people of these towns he passed through, coming out of their rooted pasts and their mock rambles, coming out of their time. He himself had no time. He was free; helpless.

This may be Miss Welty's clearest image of a future that she foresaw a long time ago, and that we have now inherited. Once the man of the future (like Tate's George Posy) the deracinated Harris is now very much the man of the present. It is noteworthy that the eternal present which he inhabits is in the story's scheme of things a sort of hell on earth. In its very unity of effect, the story conveys a wholesale loss of history. Not all Miss Welty's stories are about this kind of loss. But most of them do work within a very compact temporal period. The history that struggles so energetically to force itself upward into the present moment is implied more than it is stated, even in a story so rich with history, as, for example, "Clytie."

The majority of Southern storywriters have and still do follow a similar technical pattern—working very tightly to packets of real time. Flannery O'Connor certainly did so, for reasons probably more religious than aesthetic. Her stories reside in a perpetual state of eschatological apprehension—each moment is potentially that when the soul will be summoned to judgment. O'Connor's work is ahistorical, then, from the moment of its conception. Another, less dogmatic moral fabulist, George Garrett, also sticks close to clock and calendar in his short fiction, which is often complicated, however, by the presence of a ghostly voice that floats above the action and ranges more freely through larger chronologies than the action details. A younger generation of short-story writers has adopted these methods of managing time within strict limits, probably without question, for the most part.

In increasingly dramatic contrast to this general tendency is the work of Peter Taylor, who by moving in a different direction has discovered very different possibilities. Peter Taylor is quintessentially a storywriter: his recent novel, *A Summons to Memphis*, is simply a longer and more detailed version of his old story *Dean of Men*. As a storywriter he has certain important abilities that scarcely anyone else in the South or anywhere else in America appears to possess or even desire.

Each of Taylor's stories has the potential of a novel. Many cover the amount of real time that a novel would address—a long novel, too, a "saga." Taylor's gift is for engaging, convincing, compelling summary. He is able to make his stories account for the whole lives of their characters—and not through the flashbacks or the short bursts of background exposition that real-time stories conventionally employ. In reading a Taylor story one seems to pass through the lives of the characters alongside them, so that when the present moment is reached it is all the more potent with meaning. The short story is Taylor's ideal form because of his extraordinary ability to fuse a long chronology with some particularly revealing instant, as in his masterpiece (one of them) "A Wife of Nashville."

Helen Ruth put her hands on the handlebar of the teacart. She pushed the cart a little way over the tile

floor but stopped when he repeated his question. It wasn't to answer his question that she stopped, however. "Oh, my dears!" she said, addressing her whole family. Then it was a long time before she said anything more. John R. and the three boys remained seated at the table, and while Helen Ruth gazed past them and toward the front window of the sun parlor, they sat silent and still, as though they were in a picture. What could she say to them, she kept asking herself. And each time she asked the question, she received for answer some different memory of seeming unrelated things out of the past twenty years of her life. These things presented themselves as answers to her question, and each of them seemed satisfactory to her. But how little sense it would make to her husband and her grown sons, she reflected, if she should suddenly begin telling them about the long hours she had spent waiting in that apartment at the Vaux Hall while John R. was on the road for the Standard Candy Company, and in the same breath should tell them how plainly she used to talk to Jane Blakemore and how Jane pretended the baby made her nervous and went back to Thornton. Or suppose she should abruptly remind John R. of how ill at ease the wives of his hunting friends used to make her feel and how she had later driven Sarah's worthless husband out of the yard, threatening to call a bluecoat. What if she should suddenly say that because a woman's husband hunts, there is no reason for *her* to hunt, any more than because a man's wife sews, there is reason for him to sew. She felt that she would be willing to say anything at all, no matter how cruel or absurd it was, if it would make them understand that everything that happened in life only demonstrated in some way the lonesomeness that people felt. She was ready to tell them about sitting in the old nursery at Thornton and waiting for Carrie and Jane Blakemore to come out of the cabin in the yard. If it would make them see what she had been so long in learning to see, she would even talk about the "so much else" that had been missing from her life and that she had not been able to name, and about the foolish mysteries she had so nobly accepted upon her reconciliation with John R. To her, these things were all one now; they were her loneliness, the loneliness from which everybody, knowingly or unknowingly, suffered. But she knew that her husband and her sons did not recognize her loneliness or Jess McGehee's or their own.

There could be no more convincing illustration of the old Southern literary touchstone—that the past inhabits the present and is alive within it. There is also almost no other Southern storywriter capable of achieving such an effect, except for Elizabeth Spencer. Her latest collection, *Jack of Diamonds*, shows her adept at bringing twenty or thirty year blocks of familial history within the borders of a single story, like the extraordinary "Cousins"; however short such a story may be, the reader must feel that it has come a long, long

Two Poems on Declension

by James Seay

1. Won't You Be Mine, Columbine?

More than once I've dreamed of draping the skins
of animals over my head and body.
I mean trying to get wholly within there.
As though I could trade
for a walk on the wild side
or maybe even be the thing
whose life was taken.
One woman laughed and liked it
when I put a pelt over my back
and got down on the rug
to make the mythic sounds,
or so I thought, dramatizing my dreams.
Thinking about it later,
I realized she would have warmed to things
if I'd pressed for something other
than rubbing our hands
over an animal skin
and talking the dream text
down to number, gender, and case.
There are tales that apply.
Like the one about the man
who couldn't find his ass
with both hands behind him.
True, true, you push that skin thing too far,
you end up in those movies with leather.
Still and all, a lot was lost
when we wandered into this grammar lust
and auto-hermeneutics.

2. The Reaching Back with Both Hands

Varro long ago
observed how *columba* served
as both male and female dove
until the breed became domestically blessed and important.
That's when the formal difference — *columbus*
and *columba* — was introduced to distinguish.
His point regarded the sporadic
changes of form as a norm
along with the long-standing.
What are we talking about?
Cock & hen, poetry & prose, tight-ass & knee-jerk,
and how it works in life or art, peace or war:
an evident difference ignored
until what we call
a practical need succeeds
in division by expression.
I don't like some of these lines
any more than you do;
it's easy to see why the convention changed.
As for the economics,
Varro cites his aunt
who once sold five thousand doves
for a return of sixty thousand sesterces.
The birds were served at a single banquet.
He describes the ground plan of the aviary
as shaped like a schoolboy's writing tablet,
rectangular with rounded head.
By the time the flusher Romans were finished
with the *villa rustica*, it was a pleasure dome.
They draped nature around their lives like skins,
the Roman coin talking
turkey with pure pastoral.
Sooner or later, Little Mister *Sine Qua Non*
had to have a name of his own.
Otherwise who would have sailed the ocean blue?
What are we talking about?
Maybe it's all finally phallegoric.
Or like what my sons used to say
when I asked them why a movie
they wanted permission to see was rated R:
sex drugs rock & roll,
the oldest declension, *mutatis mutandis*, of all.