

FATHER TAYLOR

BY RALPH WALDO EMERSON

[This paper shows some evidence of having been a part of a lecture called "The Poet," given by Mr. Emerson in a course called *The Times*, in 1841. A part of it was also used by him in a lecture on Eloquence, in 1867, most of which is found in the volume *Letters and Social Aims*. The sheets relating to Father Taylor — although a double system of numbering shows that they were used in two lectures — were found apart, as if used for a parlor-lecture, with the title "Improvisation — Rev. Edward Taylor."

The story of this renowned preacher's life and labors has been well told by Bishop Haven and Judge Russell in their memorial volume, *Father Taylor, the Sailor Preacher*, yet for the benefit of readers of a new generation a short sketch may not be out of place here.

Edward Thomson Taylor, a Virginian of humble parentage, was born near Richmond in 1793. He ran away at the age of seven years and followed the sea until, a privateersman on the *Black Hawk*, he was captured and held for a long time in British prisons. Shortly before his capture, while in the port of Boston, he strayed into the Bromfield Street Methodist Chapel and experienced conversion. In the prison at Halifax his comrades begged him to pray and preach for them in place of the English chaplain, and he thus found his calling for life. On regaining his freedom he became a peddler, approbated to preach as he traveled. Then for a short time he was a farmer in Saugus; but, filled with zeal for saving souls, and conscious of his power in prayer and preaching, — though at that time he could hardly read, — he became an itinerant preacher. His earnestness and power drew great companies to hear him in the circuits along the coasts of Massachusetts and Rhode Island.

In 1828, some members of the Methodist Church in Boston strove to organize a society for the moral and religious elevation of seamen. This led to the formation of the Boston Port Society, which established a little Seaman's Bethel, and called the young privateersman-preacher to labor for this neglected class. The funds to lease the chapel could not be raised in Boston, but the young pastor went South to plead for it and returned with the money. The Society was non-sectarian from the first.

In 1832 the merchants of Boston were aroused to help the seamen, and adopted the Boston Port Society and built the Seamen's Bethel in North Square, and, soon after, the Suffolk Savings Bank was established in their aid, and also the Mariners' House.

Until the time of Father Taylor's resignation in 1868, three years before his death, the Bethel was the scene of his earnest labor and brilliant success. His loved seamen were the main object of his work, but among the crowds that filled his church were many of the best hearts and heads of Massachusetts in that day. Though a Methodist to the core, his faith was broad enough to accept good and earnest men of other beliefs than his own. The Unitarians were among his chief helpers. Mr. Emerson and he were friends from the days when the younger minister had invited him to preach in his pulpit, close by in Hanover Street; and later, when Unitarians looked askance at him, Father Taylor was his guest when he came to preach in Concord.

Mrs. Ednah D. Cheney relates that Father Taylor once said to Governor Andrew, "Mr. Emerson is one of the sweetest creatures God ever made: there is a screw loose somewhere in the machinery, yet I cannot tell where it is, for I never heard it jar. He must go to heaven when he dies, for if he went to hell the devil would not know what to do with him. But he knows no more of the religion of the New Testament than Balaam's ass did of the principles of Hebrew Grammar." — EDWARD W. EMERSON.]

I DO not know whether any of my audience have known Father Taylor, — but this genius appeared thirty years ago in the humble church, the "Seaman's Bethel" in Boston, a man in every way remarkable, — capable of doing wonders

among the neglected class to which he was devoted, — and soon awaked wonder and joy in hearers of every class, — perhaps most in the most intelligent minds.

He preached in Concord in our old

church in June, 1841, and I then noted how men are always interested in a man, and all the various extremes of our little village society were for once brought together in the church. Black and white, grocer, contractor, lumberman, Methodist, and preacher, joined with the permanent congregation in rare union. Nobody but Webster assembles the same extremes. The speaker instantly shows the reason, in the breadth of his social genius. He is mighty Nature's child, another Robert Burns, trusting entirely to her power, as he has never been deceived by it, and arriving unexpectedly every moment at new and happiest deliverances. How joyfully and manly he spreads himself abroad!

Obviously, he is one of the class of superior men, and every one associates him necessarily with Webster, and, if Fox and Burke were alive, with Fox and Burke. And yet I must say that, judged by any theologic rule and standard, his preaching is a Punch and Judy affair, the preaching quite accidental, and ludicrously copied and caricatured from the old style, as he probably found it in some New Jersey or Connecticut vestries. As well as he can he mimics and exaggerates the parade of method and logic, of text and argument: but after much threatening to exterminate all gainsayers by his syllogisms, and a punctilious and emphatic enumeration of the division of his points, he seldom remembers any of the divisions of his plan after the first, and the slips and gulfs of his logic would involve him in quick confusion, if it were not for the inexhaustible wit by which he dazzles and destroys memory, and conciliates and carries captive the dullest and the keenest hearer.

He is not expert in books, has not read Calvin or Leclerc or Eichhorn, but he is perfectly sure in his generous humanity. He says touching things, plain things, cogent things, grand things, which all men must perforce hear. He says them with hand and head and body and voice; the accompaniment is total, and ever va-

ried. "I am half a hundred years old, and I have never seen an unfortunate day. I have been in all the four quarters of the world, and I never saw any men I could not love. We have sweet conferences and prayer-meetings; we meet every day. There are not hours enough in the day, not days enough in the year for us."

He was about embarking for Europe: he said, "To be sure, I am sorry to leave my own babes, but He who takes care for every whale, and can give him a ton of herrings for a breakfast, will find food for my babes." What affluence! There never was such activity of fancy. How wilful and despotic is his rhetoric! mis-using figures, yet bettering them. "No," said he, of virtue, "not the blaze of Diogenes' lamp, added to the noonday sun, would suffice to find it." Everything dances and disappears, — changes, becomes its contrary, — in his sculpturing hands. How he played with the word *Lost* yesterday! The parent had lost his child. *Lost* became found in the twinkling of an eye. So will it always be.

[Mr. Emerson here introduced the following notes from his journal].

Father Taylor in the afternoon "wishing his sons a happy new year," "praying God for his servants of the brine, to favor commerce, to bless the bleached sail, the white foam, and through commerce to Christianize the Universe." "May every deck," he said, "be stamped by the hallowed feet of godly captains, and the first watch and the second watch be watchful for the Divine Light." He thanked God he had not been in Heaven for the last twenty-five years, then indeed he had been a dwarf in grace, but now he had his redeemed souls around him. And so he went on, — this poet of the sailor and of Ann Street, — fusing all the rude hearts of his auditory with the heat of his own love, and making the abstractions of the philosophers accessible and effectual to them also. He is a fine study to the metaphysician or the life philosopher. He is profuse of himself, he never remembers

the looking-glass. They are foolish who fear that notice will spoil him. They never made him, and such as they cannot unmake him. He is a real man of strong nature, and noblest, richest lines on his countenance. He is a work of the same hand that made Demosthenes, Shakespeare, and Burns, and is guided by instincts diviner than rules. His whole discourse is a string of audacious felicities harmonized by a spirit of joyful love. Everybody is cheered and exalted by him. He is a living man, and explains at once what Whitfield and Fox and Father Moody were to their audiences, by the total infusion of his own soul into his assembly, and consequent absolute dominion over them. How puny, how cowardly, other preachers look by the side of this preaching! He shows us what a man can do. As I sat last Sunday in my country pew, I thought this Sunday I would see two living chapels, Swedenborg's and the Seamen's; and I was not deceived.

Sept. 1835. Edward Taylor came to see us. Dr. Ripley showed him the battlefield. "Why put the monument on this bank?" he asked. "You must write on it, 'Here is the place where the Yankees made the British show the back seam of their stockings.'" He said he had been fishing at Groton, "and the fishes were as snappish as the people, so that he looked to see if the scales were not turned wrong side out, etc."

Nov. 1836. Edward Taylor is a noble work of the Divine cunning, suggesting the wealth of Nature. If he were not so strong I should call him lovely. What cheerfulness in his genius and what consciousness of strength! "My voice is thunder," he said, in telling me how well he was. And what teeth, and eyes, and brow, and aspect! I study him as a jaguar, or an Indian, for his untamed physical perfections. He is a work, a man, not to be predicted, his vision poetic and pathetic, sight of love unequalled. How can he transform all those whiskered, shaggy, untrim tarpaulins into sons of light and

hope, by seeing the man within the sailor, seeing them to be sons, lovers, brothers, husbands?

But hopeless it is to make him that he is not; to try to bring him to account to you or to himself for aught of his inspiration. A creature of instinct, his colors are all opaline and dove's-neck-lustres, and can only be seen from a distance. If you see the *ignis-fatuus* in a swamp, and go to the place, the light vanishes; if you retire to the spot whereon you stood, it reappears. So with Taylor's muse. It is a panorama of images from all nature and art whereon the sun and stars shine,—but go up to it, and nothing is there. His instinct, unconscious instinct, is the nucleus or point of view, and this defies science and eludes it.

1849. F. went to Father Taylor's prayer-meeting, and an old salt told his experiences, and how intemperate he had been for many years, "but now, dear brothers, Jesus Christ is my grog-shop." Father Taylor hereupon recommended to his brethren to "be short," and "sit down when they had done."

1863. "You tell me a great deal of what the devil does, and what power he has: when did you hear from Christ last?" he asked of some Calvinist friends.

In his volley of epithets he called God "a charming Spirit." He spoke of men who "sin with ingenuity, sin with genius, sin with all the power they can draw." But you feel this inspiration, and he marches into the untried depths with the security of a grenadier. He will weep and grieve and pray and chide in a tempest of passionate speech, and never break the perfect propriety with a single false note, and, when all is done, you still ask, or I do, "what's Hecuba to him?" Indeed, a fancy of such preternatural activity—a fancy which is a living picture-gallery in perpetual movement—can hardly permit much confinement to facts; and I think all his talk with men of business, which he repeats, all his much visiting and planning for what is practical in his Mariners' House, etc., etc. cannot

amount to much. I think his guardians and overseers and treasurers must think pretty stubbornly for themselves. Not the smallest dependence is to be put on his statement of facts. Arithmetic is only one of the nimble troop of dancers he keeps. No, this free happy expression of himself, and of the deeps of human nature, and of the sunny facts of life, of things lying massed and grouped in healthy nature, — that is his power, and his teacher. His security breathes in his manners, gestures, tones, and the expressions of his face; he lies all open to men, a man, — and disarms criticism and malignity by perfect frankness. We open our arms, too, and with half-closed eyes enjoy this sunshine. A wondrous beauty swims over the panorama and touches points with an ineffable lustre.

Everything is accidental to him, his place, his education, his church, his seamen, his whole system of religion, a mere confused dust-heap of refuse and leavings of former generations. All has a comic absurdity, *except* the sentiment of the man. He is incapable of accurate thought: he cannot analyze or discriminate: he is a singing, dancing drunkard of his wit. Only he is sure of his sentiment. That is his mother's milk; and that he feels in his bones; that heaves in his lungs, throbs in his heart, walks in his feet, and gladly he yields to the sweet magnetism, and sheds it abroad on the people, in his power. Hence, he is an example — I thought, at that moment, the single example — of an inspiration: for a wisdom not his own, not to be appropriated by him, which he could not recall or even apply, sailed to him on the gale of this sympathetic communication with his auditory. There is his closet, his college, his confessional. He disclosed his secrets there, and received informations there, which his conversation with thousands of men, and his voyages to Egypt, and his journeys in Germany and in Syria, never taught him. His whole work is a sort of day's sailing out upon the sea, not to any voyage, but to take an observation of the

sun, and come back again. Again and again, we have the whole wide horizon, — how rare a pleasure! That is the picture, the music, that he makes. His whole genius is in minstrelsy. He calls it religion, Methodism, Christianity, and other names. It is minstrelsy: he is a minstrel. All the rest is costume. For himself, he is no ascetic, no fanatic, in other fortunes might have been a genial companion, perhaps an admirable tragedian, at all events, though apparently of a moderate temperament, he would like the old cocks of the bar room a thousand times better than their austere monitors.

I said of Father Taylor that, if, with that abounding imagination of his, he had only known how to control it, he would have been the greatest of orators. As it is, he is its victim. Every one of this crowd of images that rush before his eyes leads him away from his point, until he quite forgets what he was to prove. What an eloquence he suggests! Ah! could he only guide those grand sea-horses of his with which he rides and caracoles on the waves of the sunny ocean of his thought! But no: he sits and is drawn up and down the ocean-currents by the strong sea-monsters, only on that condition, that he shall not guide.

He is a man with no *proprium* or *peculium*, but all social. Leave him alone, and there is no man, there is no substance, but a relation. His power is a certain mania or low inspiration that repeats for us the tripod and possession of the ancients. I think every hearer feels that something like it were possible to himself, if he could consent to a certain abandonment. One might say, he has sold his mind for his soul (using soul in a semi-animal sense, including animal spirits). Art could not compass this fluency and felicity. His sovereign security results from a certain renunciation and abandonment. He runs for luck, and by readiness to say everything, good and bad, says the best things. Then a new will and understanding organize themselves in this new sphere of no-will and no-under-

standing, and, as fishermen use a certain discretion within their luck, to find a good fishing ground, or berrywomen to gather quantities of blueberries, so he knows his topics and unwritten briefs, and where the profusion of words and images will likeliest recur.

All of us who have lived on the sea-coast, and who are old enough, have probably heard this grand improvisator, this excellent man, and enjoyed the wealth of his genius and virtues. It is no disparagement to his admirable gifts to say

that the ideal orator must have somewhat more. Could we add to this marvellous richness of fancy, to this high and tender humanity, a stern control, — a wider perception of truth, that should use all these fine faculties as instruments, *it* always the master, not the victim of its own powers, — then we have the consummate orator. Such was Demosthenes, a power in the state and in history. Such was Burke; such, in our own times, not to name many too partial examples, was Kossuth.

THEOCRITUS ON AGRADINA

BY THOMAS NELSON PAGE

THE spacious cities hummed with toil;
The monarch reared his towers to the skies;
Men delved the fruitful soil
And studied to be wise.
Along the highway's rocky coil
The mailed legions rang;
Smiling unheeded mid the moil
The Poet sang.

The glittering cities long are heaps;
The starry towers lie level with the plain;
The desert serpent sleeps
Where soared the marble fane.
The stealthy, bead-eyed lizard creeps
Where gleamed the Tyrant's throne;
That grandeur dark Oblivion steeps,
The song sings on.