

1996

On James Tate

Carolyn Wright

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wright, Carolyn. "On James Tate." *The Iowa Review* 26.1 (1996): 183-188. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.4561>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Carolyn Wright

ON JAMES TATE

JOHN ASHBERY'S BLURB on the back cover lauds the "valuable service" *Selected Poems* performs "by drawing together the best of Tate's work from many individual collections" and allowing us "finally to take a measure of his genius." As America's senior surrealist—Tate being now the biggest brother of the mid-career poetic brat pack—Ashbery is the appropriate blurb artiste for this book, though his tone both here and in his own poetry is more serious and more serene than Tate's has ever been. "Valuable service," though? It is too solemn and respectable a choice of terms for a volume of Tate's, even a work with such overtly consolidating motives as a selection of best hits, oldies-but-goodies from the out-of-print zone. It smacks too much of the prosperous Midwest burgher pieties that Tate's poetry has spent its energies folding, spindling (that mysterious Post Official act) and mutilating—all in a tone of antic despair and high mock-seriousness. In its "mad wit," its hectic and careening pace, its junkyard-on-the-edge-of-town culling of the artifacts and imagistic bric-a-brac of Americana, its cartoon strip exclamations and caught-with-my-pants-down awkward situations of the various speakers, Tate's poetry is, if nothing else, fun to read.

Morbidly fun at times, but still one gets the feeling that the poet, too, has had a mighty good time all these years—the volume spans nineteen years and nine previous collections—and has still done well, very well, in his career. He's been thumbing his nose, poetically of course, at those dour-faced, prosperous Kansas City burghers with their fortunes in pork bellies and glue futures, who scowl and think that he should be punished for enjoying himself so much, for writing whatever comes into his head and not trying particularly hard to *mean* anything! It is a sore gall to those who think poetry should mean and not be, that an heir of the

Selected Poems, by James Tate. Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England, 1991. 239 pp. ISBN 0-8195-2190-6, \$27.50 (cloth); ISBN 0-8195-1192-7, \$14.95 (paper).

Worshipful Company of Fletchers, by James Tate. The Ecco Press, 1994. ISBN 0-88001-380-X, \$20.00 (cloth).

Beat generation and a literary cousin of Gregory Corso (whose “Marriage Poem” is still one of this reviewer’s all-time faves) should get away with such promiscuous free association, any image with any other! Such mental freedom, such poetic profligacy, such irresponsible traffic in irony and runaway imagination, should not be condoned, much less rewarded with prizes, publication contracts, tenured teaching posts, and praise from the likes of John Ashbery. It is amazing that the spectre of Jesse Helms has not risen up to denounce this volume, retroactively defund its publisher, and use the female anatomical part flashed on the movie screen on page 149 to whip up the fury of right-wingers (and maybe some post-feminists) to gut the NEA once and for all.

And it is difficult, given the nature and spirit of Tate’s poetry, to *review* it in the standard review-mode of evaluative commentary, filled out with quoted lines as examples. Better to follow Tate’s own method—as I think I see it—and *reflect*, re-evoke, the essence of his poetry. Maybe even try—seriously—to subvert it, as Tate’s poetry subverts the pretensions it takes on, and lets the poetic anarchist’s bomb roll out of his kangaroo pockets. It is certainly a lot more fun to operate like this, with Tate himself as the example. It is liberating, for those of us who sometimes believe that poetry-writing, like life, is a serious business, to let go of all that impedimenta and just let it rip. Whether or not Tate is genuinely free, out on the wide open spaces of the mind, doesn’t so much matter. He makes us think he is.

But there is a serious intent in the literary subversion Tate practices. Reading through this selection that covers the whole range of his work since the Yale Prize selection, *The Lost Pilot*, was published in 1967, I get an overwhelming sense of bravado in the face of isolation: the speakers who assume a jaunty, self-deprecating tone out of their own alienation. Poems picked almost at random from the various volumes, such as “Up Here,” “Deaf Girl Playing,” “Amnesia People,” “A Radical Departure,” “With a Child All Day,” “Nobody’s Business,” “A Wedding,” and “Neighbors,” all seem to reveal an essential disconnectedness between people—men and women, children and their parents, adults and children, and even friends—that prevents the speakers in these poems from perceiving or achieving any real relationship. In these poems, human interaction is mostly empty form, sociable—often cheerful—noises, and going through the motions of interaction. In Tate’s world, the same surrealist dynamic that sets the

antic tone and fuels the zany leaps between images, operates between people, with distinctly un-antic, unzany effect.

But Tate's poetry does not wax confessional, does not invite much speculation about the personal life of the poet, and does not attempt to take responsibility for plumbing and delineating the depths of the human condition. It seems that the best response is not to mourn or deplore this state of things; after all, not much can be done anyway, and poetry—especially poetry—makes nothing happen. Sadness may lurk under the surface, but what to do? Best to celebrate the madness of the world with madly celebratory or satiric poems, among them some of Tate's classics: "Prose Poem," "Lewis and Clark Overheard in Conversation," "A Guide to the Stone Age," "Read the Great Poets," "The Motorcyclists," "Poem to Some of My Recent Poems," "Toward Saint Looney," and one of my favorites, "Teaching the Ape to Write Poems":

They didn't have much trouble
teaching the ape to write poems:
first they strapped him into the chair,
then tied the pencil around his hand
(the paper had already been tied down).
Then Dr. Bluespire leaned over his shoulder
and whispered into his ear:
"You look like a god sitting there.
Why don't you write something?"

Maybe Tate is trying to tell us something here about poetry and about how seriously we take it. Yet, having won the 1992 Pulitzer Prize in Poetry for this volume, Tate ironically may find his work taken even more seriously by the industrious burghers of verse.

Echoing down the poetic rogues' galleries and the salons of competitive laughter in which the covens of Parnassian wannabes ensconce themselves, and whence they periodically sally forth in their ongoing skirmishes against the enclaves of academic privilege, the most resonant voice insinuating itself into the metonymic sound system is that of James Tate. *Worshipful Company of Fletchers* is the most recent miscellany of poetic follies—some might say miscarriages of poetic justice—since Tate won the

1992 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for his *Selected Poems*. As in that volume of golden oldies, these new poems proffer no earnest, nerdy responses to the eternally veridical questions of Truth, Beauty and the American Way. Instead, they deliver the typical Tate-esque *trope de grâce* to all sanctimonious poses and stodgy cogitation, all verdigris-encrusted mental statuary. Consider the “Little Poem with Argyle Socks”:

Behind every great man
there sits a rat.
And behind every great rat,
there's a flea.
Beside the flea there is an encyclopedia.
Every now and then the flea sneezes, looks up,
and flies into action, reorganizing history.
The rat says, “God, how I *hate* irony.”
To which the great man replies,
“Now now now, darling, drink your tea.”

Post-Victorian pieties are mercilessly, and mirthfully, decimated in such proverbial subversions.

Tate's *modus operandi* is the fractured, antic narrative in the voices of an assortment of muzzy-headed but plucky speakers. These equivocal informants leap and spin and flail their arms around the ostensible plot, and then return to the theme just enough to keep readers actively baffled but cackling with complicity in our suspension of disbelief. A few of my faves in this subgenre are “50 Views of Tokyo,” “Like a Scarf,” and “A Glowworm, A Lemur, and Some Women.” Sometimes the spirit of surrealistic mockery and in-your-face play is juxtaposed with an ominous surround of international political issues, as in the opening lines of “The Nitrogen Cycle”:

Before the break-up of my country
I was content to lie under the kitchen sink
and gnaw on busted pipes.
There was a nest of mice
with whom I could exchange recipes.

Occasionally, Tate veers perilously close to the sort of grim social sce-

nario we usually consume in reports in the metro section or deplore on the op-ed pages, as per his depiction in “What the City Was Like” of the inarticulate will-to-power simmering in the deepest reaches of couch-potato culture:

Across town, a man lived his entire life
without ever going out on the street.
He destroyed his part of the city many times
without getting off his sofa.

But even in the most politically corrigible of contexts, Tate’s facility with the absurd wins out.

In these closing years of the twentieth century, this poet is not one of the impresarios of attitude-to-go: those who foist their post-war, post-structuralist, post-industrialist, post-employment benefits and usufructs off upon the unsuspecting public at post-publication parties. “*Caveat Pre-emptor!*” would be his motto and leitmotif, if he had one. A whole three decades ahead of Generation X, James Tate has moved away from the edgy desperation disguised as hip nihilism—the who-gives-a grin with a grimace behind it—that marked his first books. This latest poetry doesn’t come at us with the asperity, the lean and hungry bitterness of all those earlier works, which this reviewer has dubbed the “Son of Lost Pilot” collections. Tate seems to have reached “the windless, / halcyon days” of a separate peace “with human degradation, lust and debauchery,” where he can hang out in some juke joint of the spirit and smile benignly at the passing schools of “phlegmatic,” perpetually behind-the-ball Stoics:

They are late Stoa,
very late. They missed the bus. They should have
been here last night. The joint was jumping.
But people change, they grow up, they fly around.

Tate himself appears to have changed, grown up, and flown around in his own manic—but no longer depressive—sphere. In these largely humorous poems, such as “More Later, Less the Same,” he dares to be silly, even self-mocking:

“He is being nibbled to death by ducks” shines

with such style, such poise and reserve. . .

So said James the Lesser to James the More.

It is as if the young poet had discovered that under the ordered, rational smile-face surface of childhood lurks the Kafkaesque adult world of absurdity, despair, and alienation. Quite logically, he had written all his poetry in a spirit of frustration and revenge: "I was suffering from post-natal insanity." Then in mid-life he has suddenly broken through to "a beautiful, puissant form and a lucid thought": that "serenity has triumphed in its mindless, atrophied way."

Though this is a comically compromised serenity, it is nevertheless a state in which the poet seems to perceive that beneath the existential grimace, beneath the social grin, there is another, cosmically beatific smirk on the face of the deep—which could be signalling that all is still meaningless and absurd, but that that is supremely okay. Or perhaps on a more basic level, Tate is simply demonstrating that middle-aged rockers, even poetic ones, can still leap up out of their tenured chairs and "fly around."