
Brian Henry, ed. *On James Tate*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004. 176p.

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Make no mistake: Brian Henry's *On James Tate* is a book with a chip on its shoulder. As his (too-)brief "Preface" speedily establishes, Henry is adamant almost to the point of combativeness in his insistence that James Tate's poetic oeuvre possesses substantial literary merit. Henry registers his dismay that Tate—whose first book, *The Lost Pilot*, appeared in the Yale Younger Poets Series in 1967, and who received the Pulitzer Prize in 1991 for his *Selected Poems*, the National Book Award in 1994 for his *Worshipful Company of Fletchers*, and the Tanning Prize in 1995 for his overall contribution to poetry—has throughout his career been given short shrift by over-matched reviewers and impercipient critics. Brooking no dismissive categorization of Tate's writing as mere "silliness" and "nonsense," or as derivatively "surrealist" or "absurdist," such as he feels has dominated earlier critical assessment, Henry has taken it upon himself to assemble a volume of essays from critics who forthrightly assume that Tate's poetry is important and meaningful.

On James Tate is the eighteenth volume to appear in the University of Michigan Press' "Under Discussion" series, a series founded by Donald Hall and currently under the general editorship of David Lehman. The volume is comprised of two sections: a set of nine critical essays, seven of them commissioned especially for the collection, that suggest the complexity, range, and challenge of Tate's work, and a set of thirteen previously published book reviews strategically selected to represent the scope of the appraisal of Tate's writing from *The Lost Pilot* (1967) to his *Memoir of the Hawk* (2002). The book reviews, which do tend to be skeptical or even negative regarding the value of Tate's poetic achievement, establish a background against which Henry's essayists can write. The essayists provide markedly more respectful and informed treatments of Tate's literary contribution than the reviewers.

Intuiting, probably correctly, that Tate may be first and foremost a poet's poet, Henry has selected poet-essayists to discuss and critique Tate's poetry. With a single, notable exception, the essay contributors to Henry's volume, like Henry himself, are poets with published volumes of poetry to their credit, and Henry offers an essay of his own to further the cause of promoting Tate's appreciation. The non-poet contributor is the critic Marjorie Perloff, whose essay adds stature to the collection.

And the essays in *On James Tate* are valuable, indeed. In "Nobody's Business," Kevin Hart tallies points of contact between Tate's poetry and the works of several European and 20th-century America poets, then argues effectively that Tate's work has unique value. Andrew Zawacki, in "Present and Unaccounted For': James Tate

and Mimetology,” raise Platonic concerns about the ethics of speakers impersonating others, while searching unsuccessfully for Tate’s authentic “self” amid the prosopoeial personae haunting his poems. Katy Lederer, in “Adventitious Obstacles: Process and Intent in James Tate’s Work,” confronts the common characterization of Tate’s writing as “surrealist,” in the French Surrealist-Antonin Artaud tradition, and finds Tate to be too sensible, logical, humble, and humanistically affirmative to suffer such a label. Bin Ramke, in “James Tate’s Lost Mother: ‘Distance from the Loved One,’” suggests that Tate’s poetry may be most effective and affective in the dynamic moment of its unfolding between Tate-as-reader and his audience listeners. Henry, in “Emersonian Transition in James Tate’s *The Lost Pilot*,” attempts to place Tate in an essentially American, Emersonian transcendentalist literary tradition. And Mark Ford, in “Distance from Loved Ones,” detects a Thoreauvian subversiveness in Tate’s “distantly intimate” poems. In “A Kind of Fluidity”: James Tate’s Variations on the Prose Poem,” Marjorie Perloff astutely analyzes Tate’s “prose poetry” or “poetic prose” and finds that Tate, however his lyric writing may be denominated, ultimately respects and adheres to the “poetic decorum” of narrative sequence. Donald Revell, in “The Desperate Buck and Wing: James Tate and the Failure of Ritual,” argues that Tate’s poetic courage in the face of his own verbal rendering of life’s losses is his most remarkable virtue. And Lee Upton, in what may be the best essay in the book, “The Master of the Masterless: James Tate and the Pleasures of Error,” argues that Tate’s poetic celebration of error, failure, confusion, and defeat redefines and reestablished truth, success, wisdom, and hope.

The inclusion of a comprehensive, authoritative chronology of Tate’s life and work could have contributed to the usefulness of the volume. Recurring emphases emerge from the essays—the “prosiness” of Tate’s “poetry”; Tate’s apparent inclination to frustrate, defy, or even molest his readers; critics’ need to pin down and delimit Tate’s super-protean poetic personae; the persistent critical privileging of Tate’s first book, *The Lost Pilot*, over his three decades of subsequent work—that merit reiteration; and Henry, in his “Preface,” could have made an attempt to synthesize the essays of his contributors. That said, the essays and previously published reviews Henry has selected for *On James Tate* offer useful, thoughtful, intelligent approaches to Tate’s recalcitrant, illusive, invidious writing.

Henry’s *On James Tate* is a sometimes provocative and generally illuminating collection that deserves to be read and studied. Those determined to understand how Tate’s poetry succeeds should read this book. Those fortunate enough to be compelled by Tate’s poetry should read this book. ✱