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Preface

James Tate's poetry has generated an abundance of opinions but a lack of useful criticism. As Charles Simic noted in a 2002 review of *Memoir of the Hawk* (reprinted in this collection), "despite his many honors and a large following, there has been very little critical writing on [Tate's] work. . . . The way the critics usually cope with him is to call him a Surrealist or a Dadaist and leave it at that." A collection, if not a convergence, of Tate criticism seems overdue.

More misunderstood than neglected, Tate's books of poetry have received more than their share of misguided criticism. Even supposedly illustrious publications have licensed shoddy criticism—a consistent inability, or refusal, to approach Tate's poetry on its own terms. With the exception of a well-considered review of Tate's *Selected Poems* by Mark Jarman, the *Hudson Review* has systematically published hostile, poorly argued reviews of many of Tate's books. In a review of *The Oblivion Ha-Ha* in that magazine, William H. Pritchard focuses mainly on the poems' "sporty surrealist moments," and in a later review of *Hints to Pilgrims*, Pritchard calls the book "a huge sly elegant piece of trifling on the assumption I guess that the original surrealists didn't do a full enough job of it." Despite Pritchard's claim, in a 1984 review of *Constant Defender*, to have "accepted [Tate] for what he is," he still cannot say anything intelligent about Tate's poetry, choosing instead to call the poet "an amusing rogue with words, an incorrigible jokester and molester of all linguistic straight arrows." In a review of *Riven Doggeries* in the *Hudson Review*, James Finn Cotter claims that "Nothing at all controls James Tate's choice of metaphors, similes, images, or statements in his new book," and he criticizes Tate's humor as "sophomoric." Dick Allen, reviewing *Reckoner* for the same magazine, disapprovingly cites Tate's "extreme surrealism" and describes the book as full of "smarty-pants nonsense poems" and "occasional realistic poetry." The level of discourse on Tate's poetry reaches its nadir in the *Hudson Review* when Thomas M. Disch refers to *Worshipful Company of Fletchers* as "a whole box of Little Debbie Snack Cakes." Despite the reactionary

(as opposed to responsive) strain running through these reviews, the issue is not whether one agrees with their assessments, but whether these assessments do anything except reveal the critics' abilities to bring their own preconceptions to bear on a poetry that does not reward such an approach. These comments are distortive, simple-minded, and intellectually lazy.

As this book is intended as a corrective to this kind of criticism, it might be helpful for me to cite other instances of the shabby treatment Tate's work has received. In a review of *Viper Jazz* in *Poetry*, William Logan claims that Tate's poems are "incomprehensible," "incoherent," and "merely silly." In a review of *Riven Doggeries* in *Sewanee Review*, Calvin Bedient complains that Tate is "still stuck in adolescence." In *Poetry*, Bruce Murphy describes *Worshipful Company of Fletchers* as a "collision of [John] Ashbery and surrealism." And in a review of *Shroud of the Gnome* in the *New York Times Book Review*, Adam Kirsch refers to Tate's poetry as "nonsensical" and full of "silliness." A consistent strain of thought in such reviews is that Tate's early work, particularly *The Lost Pilot*, was acceptable because it was more accessible, but that his poetry gradually became too bizarre to deserve careful consideration or praise.

Tate has not helped the situation; he has written little prose and has given relatively few interviews, and therefore has not established the criteria by which his poetry should be judged. Critics have had to focus on the poetry, which apparently has proven too strenuous an activity. Part of the problem rests in some critics' refusal to take humor seriously; such overly earnest critics dismiss Tate's humor as immature, mistake his linguistic adventuresomeness for nonsense, and fault him for having fun. Very few critics, hostile or friendly, have understood Tate's irreverence. Admittedly, the language, tone, and development of a Tate poem can be slippery, and much of his work eludes or thwarts conventional modes of understanding and discourse, opting instead for variability (of meaning and of interpretation), dissonance, and openness. Clumsy generalizations, quick dismissal, and vacuous praise are the perhaps inevitable results that this book is intended to combat.

This book's aim is to help readers approach James Tate's poetry. Criticism that only judges presents a shut door that readers are discouraged from opening. If criticism does not open any doors, it is useless, however stylish or persuasive the writing. As editor of this volume, I am not interested in essays that seek to canonize or chastise, effuse or condemn; instead, I am interested in essays that elu-

cidate Tate's work. While I would not choose to edit such a book if I did not consider Tate's poetry significant, I have not dictated any terms to the contributors. The topics of the essays were of their authors' choosing, though I occasionally made suggestions. This collection gathers seven essays commissioned specifically for this book and two previously published essays (by Donald Revell and Lee Upton). In order to present context for and a narrative of the critical reception of Tate's poetry, I have selected a modest yet representative group of reviews of Tate's books, spanning the thirty-four years between *The Lost Pilot* (1967) and *Memoir of the Hawk* (2001).

In deciding whom to ask for new essays on Tate's work, I sought critics representing different arenas of poetic thought as well as critics from different generations and from other countries (in this case, England and Australia). I looked for critics who would engage Tate's poetry with an open mind. The result is a range of essays seeking to come to terms with various aspects of Tate's poetry—for example, his innovations within the prose poem form, the failure of the consolations of ritual, his use of mimesis, the role of distancing effects, and his purposeful relinquishment of mastery.

My rationale for selecting book reviews covering Tate's career is different. I have chosen a sampling of reviews in which individual pieces more or less represent the critical climate regarding Tate at that time. Through the reviews, I aim to present a narrative of the critical reception toward Tate's poetry. The most interesting writing on Tate has appeared in small magazines, while some of the worst has appeared in more widely read venues such as the *New York Times Book Review* and *Poetry*. In general, the reviews of *The Lost Pilot* (1967) are more generous than those of Tate's next few books—*The Oblivion Ha-Ha* (1970), *Hints to Pilgrims*, (1971), *Absences* (1972), *Hottentot Ossuary* (1974), and *Viper Jazz* (1976)—while the reviews of his latest books—*Worshipful Company of Fletchers* (1994), *Shroud of the Gnome* (1997), and *Memoir of the Hawk* (2001)—are the most mixed. One explanation for this critical arc might be that most critics frown upon the kind of productivity Tate showed in the 1970s and took him to task for writing too much. Another is that critics wanted Tate to repeat the success of *The Lost Pilot*—in effect to rewrite that book. Another is that critics were slow in catching up to Tate's poetry. And yet another is that Tate's recent awards and visibility have worked to convince otherwise undecided critics that Tate is a serious poet while infuriating those who consider him less than serious (that *Selected Poems* won the Pulitzer Prize, *Worshipful*

Company of Fletchers won the National Book Award, and *Shroud of the Gnome* appeared shortly after Tate won the Tanning Prize seems to have compelled previously indifferent critics to confront his poetry). Whatever the reasons for this gradual change in the critical climate, Tate has made enduring contributions to American poetry and has written poems worthy of sustained critical attention. This collection should make that clear.



I would like to thank David Lehman and LeAnn Fields for having enough faith in this volume to publish it; Mark Ford, Kevin Hart, Katy Lederer, Marjorie Perloff, Bin Ramke, and Andrew Zawacki for agreeing to write new essays on Tate for this book and for teaching me so much in the process; Donald Revell and Lee Upton for allowing me to reprint their previously published essays; all the authors of the book reviews for writing them in the first place and for granting their permission to reprint; Christopher McDermott, Susan Rosenbaum, Matthew Zapruder, and Andrew Zawacki for their comments on my essay; and the University of Georgia Research Foundation for a faculty research grant that assisted with the editing of this book. Special thanks to Travis Nichols for stepping up.

Grateful acknowledgment is made for permission to reprint the following poems: “Distance from Loved Ones,” “First Lesson,” “The Hostile Philharmonic Orchestra,” “The Life of Poetry,” “The Lost Pilot,” “Nobody’s Business,” and “Same Tits” from *Selected Poems* by James Tate. Copyright © 1991 by James Tate. Reprinted by permission of Wesleyan University Press.