

Modern Poetry



Reconfiguring the Modern American Lyric

The Poetry of James Tate

Anthony Caleshu

PETER LANG

James Tate is one of America's most respected and senior poets, whose influence is increasingly widespread. However, his whimsical play has long challenged critics to read him with any depth. After winning the Yale Prize in 1967 for his first book, *The Lost Pilot*, published when he was just twenty-three, Tate has since gone on to win major literary awards including the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the Tanning Prize for Lifetime Achievement from the Academy of American Poets.

This is the first monograph dedicated to Tate's oeuvre. The author provides a practical reading theory for Tate, complete with contextual frameworks. Close readings of Tate's work are informed by the purposeful purposelessness of Kant, the surrealist debt to Breton, and the problems and pleasures of language as explored by Derrida. Tate's great achievement is no less than a reconfiguring of the modern American lyric as a poetry of dramatic and dialogic narrative. Composed out of 'odds and ends ... of no great moment', as the poet himself writes, Tate's work extends the varied American traditions of writers such as William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, John Berryman, and John Ashbery.

Anthony Caeshu is Associate Professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Plymouth. His writing on James Tate has appeared widely in various magazines and book chapters. He is the author of two books of poems, of which the most recent is *Of Whales: In Print, in Paint, in Sea, in Stars, in Coin, in House, in Margins* (2010).



Reconfiguring the Modern American Lyric

Modern Poetry

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PETER LANG

Oxford • Bern • Berlin • Bruxelles • Frankfurt am Main • New York • Wien

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviated titles of James Tate's collections are used for citations in the text. Because most of Tate's poems occupy a single page, the page number is only cited once, at the point of first reference.

- ABS* *Absences*. Boston, MA: Atlantic – Little, Brown, 1972
- CD* *Constant Defender*. New York: Ecco, 1983
- DFLO* *Distance from Loved Ones*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan – University Press of New England, 1990
- GS* *The Ghost Soldiers*. New York: Ecco – HarperCollins, 2008
- HO* *Hottentot Ossuary*. Cambridge, MA: Temple Bar Bookshop, 1974
- HP* *Hints to Pilgrims*. Cambridge, MA: Halty Ferguson, 1971
- LP* *The Lost Pilot*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967
- MEM* *Memoir of the Hawk*. New York: Ecco – HarperCollins, 2001
- OHH* *The Oblivion Ha-Ha*. Boston, MA: Atlantic – Little, Brown, 1970
- RD* *Riven Doggeries*. New York: Ecco, 1979
- RECK* *Reckoner*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1986
- RET* *Return to the City of White Donkeys*. New York: Ecco – HarperCollins, 2004
- SG* *Shroud of the Gnome*. Hopewell, NJ: Ecco, 1997
- SP* *Selected Poems*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan – University Press of New England, 1991
- VJ* *Viper Jazz*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1976
- WCF* *Worshipful Company of Fletcher*. Hopewell, NJ: Ecco, 1994

‘A fair shake or a chocolate shake’: The Difficulty of Reading James Tate

Little Dramas, Derailed Stories, and Simple-Minded Theories

One of James Tate’s late poems, ‘Lust for Life’, features a speaker telling us about Veronica and her will to watch and report on life’s everyday dramas:

Veronica has the best apartment in town.
It’s on the third story and has big plate glass
windows that look straight down to the town common.
She has a bird’s-eye view of all the protesters,
the fairs, the lovers, people eating lunch on
park benches; in general, the life blood of the
town. The more Veronica watched all these little
dramas, the less desire she had to actually go
out and be one herself. I called her from time
to time, but her conversation consisted of her
descriptions of what was going on in the common.
‘Now he’s kissing her and saying good-bye. He’s
getting on the bus. The bus is pulling out.
Wait a minute, she’s just joined hands with
another guy. I can’t believe it! These people
are behaving like trash.’

(*RET* 15)

Despite the speaker’s repeated attempts at conversation, Veronica is only interested in reporting the ‘common’ dramas of lunchers and lovers, the sensationalized stuff of television soap-operas, to the speaker’s increasing despair. The poem is representative of those in Tate’s oeuvre which are

character-laden and voice-driven; it assumes the performative front of a deadpan, dramatic monologue whereby the speaker is akin to a stand-up comedian of the driest humour. He might be self-aware of his part in the drama and the ironies that give momentum to his narration, but there's no self-consciousness that might betray him as anything but earnest. The central idea being exposed in 'Lust for Life' is an easy one to understand and relate to: we're all too busy being voyeurs of other people's dramas to live our own. But Tate is not a didactic poet, and if it seems he's taken to the soap-box here, by the end, his speaker has jumped down to side with Veronica. In rendering the disharmony between characters, Tate returns us to where we began and vindicates his own aesthetic; one that doesn't worry about the need for experience, but celebrates that dramas imagined can be significant in their own right:

I wonder if I'm supposed to
be worried about her. But in the end I don't.
Veronica has the best apartment in town.

Tate's poetry often flirts with the hackneyed and the banal, but always there's an upheaval or a *turn* which subverts the idiomatic or clichéd. In some respects, this constitutes a major component of his surrealism. Whilst 'Lust for Life' lacks an overtly surrealistic style or substance, its exploitation of everyday drama uses a form of satiric observation which seems akin to surrealist intention: to see the world as a place of imaginative surprise and wonder, a place of joy as well as dispiritedness and disappointment. Tate's signature use of surrealism (tragi-comic in voice and vision) is one of the arguments of this book, and if the later poems tend to emphasize dramatic and dialogic narratives, earlier work can sway toward lyric meditation and linguistic fragmentation. But it's not a continuous development, nor is it exclusive, since so many of Tate's poems straddle the lines between the lyric and the dramatic throughout his career. Consider a poem such as 'Thoughts While Reading *The Sand Reckoner*', which readily reveals a lyrical penchant for wild metaphor and parataxis, whilst reveling in the discursiveness of a 'derailed story':

What nourishes the polar star?
That's a story I refuse to tell.
Bellhops lacking a pineapple?
Or the secret ingredients of bubblebath?
Itself a derailed story.

(*RECK* 45)

Even when refusing to tell a story, Tate is telling of stories. Composed of *derailed* stories, this poem seems cobbled out of arbitrary thoughts as it charts the discursive mind reading through the night: from the mathematical text of Archimedes alluded to in the title, to Antonio Pigafetta's detail of Magellan's voyage, to Henry de Monfreid's adventure-tale, to the poems of Emily Dickinson. Tate's derailling of not just the speaker from his reading, but of Tate's own readership from the poem, raises questions about narrative discordance and linguistic utterance; we wonder what to do with lines which challenge our sense of conventional meaning and flout their imaginative invention as whimsy:

Disconsolate bunglers, incalculable cloves,
the Ship sang. Ginger scurvy.
Then I took one of them around to see chlorophyll
working in the meadow, and later bought him
a porkpie hat.

Derailling stories with random observations or extensive fragmentation exacerbates the now common postmodern idea that no story can be wholly known; instead, Tate's poetry is drawn to relating the esoteric in a bid to subvert or transplant our universal experience.

Tate's wish to derail applies to not only his own stories, but those stories which are mythic or iconic. In another poem, 'The List of Famous Hats' (from the same mid-career collection, *Reckoner*, 1986), Tate eschews our common visual of Napoleon in his bicorn hat in favour of telling us about Napoleon's private bathing cap. Imagination and speculation rule in a world where the narrator's self-confessed 'simple-minded theory' is celebrated over the scholar's 'easy' supposition (*RECK* 57). With self-awareness of self and subject, the narrator tells of the 'two minor eccentricities' of the

bathing cap. The first reveals that Napoleon has been using the same cap since a boy; now that it's too small, it's causing him many headaches. A short description of the second eccentricity and the speaker's theory about what it means concludes the poem:

The second eccentricity was that it was a *tricorn* bathing cap. Scholars like to make a lot out of this, and it would be easy to do. My theory is simple-minded to be sure: that beneath his public head there was another head and it was a pyramid or something.

Those of us who know our hats know that the bicorne started being worn around 1790 and superseded the tricorn in popularity as the military dress hat of the British, American, and French; we're smiling at the idea of Napoleon's head stuck in an out-of-fashion cap. Those of us who don't know our hats are still smiling at the private moment being detailed: the absurdity of a history rewritten, the transplantation of Napoleon from atop his horse to the bathroom, the (a)logic of the poem's movement from a hat of two points, to three points, to revealing a pyramid-shaped head of five points. The poem is steeped in plain-spoken diction and asides – 'I guess,' 'in all honesty' – and the voice, like the voice of many of Tate's speakers, is straight-faced in its exposition and supposition. To treat seriously the very thing he's not treating seriously, is the paradox of such a poem. So too is the humour which is deemed not humorous in an early antithetical aside: 'The first [eccentricity] isn't even funny.' Like much in Tate's work, the paradoxes run deep: the comedy into the territory of tragedy; or more apt in this instance, the bathos in the face of pathos.¹

Rajeev Patke, in his essay 'Poetic Knowledge', writes of 'two mutually incompatible beliefs: that poetry is a form of knowledge, [and] that poetry and knowledge correspond to different human faculties, which entail activities and produce results whose values are complementary,

1 See one of Tate's best critics, Lee Upton, for more on this poem as a 'failed attempt at mastery', from her chapter, 'James Tate: The Master of the Masterless', *The Muse of Abandonment* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1998): 110–111.

or opposed.² Tate's poetry's relationship to knowledge can often seem deliberately confusing. 'I don't know' is a favourite, even celebrated, refrain, and an 'awful knowledge' is the burden of at least one speaker.³ It's not that Tate is opposed to knowledge per se, but as in the three poems just briefly discussed, Tate derails our knowledge-base regarding not only content, but what we might expect a poem to be and do. At the same time, he defends his own creed and aesthetics as meaningful against those who might read his work as a *flight* from knowledge, an exercise less than useful or serious in thought. To fragment the whole, and to privilege the unknown and the imagined over the known and the real is Tate's method and reason. Over the course of this study, I'll situate Tate's poetry within various fields of critical enquiry, such as the purposeful purposelessness of Kant, the surrealist debt to Breton, a dramatization of the problems of language as exemplified by Derrida. But 'theory', as Tate himself will allude to in a number of poems,⁴ is only ever a scaffold to the greater good, an understanding of the poetry itself. A humanist at heart, Tate's poetry returns us again and again to a series of common themes: his dedicated interest in poetry, his exploration of the American way of life, his preoccupation with love and family, and the significance of language as a mode of communication. The three poems I've chosen to lead us into this study are exemplary of not only Tate's subjects, but his *modus operandi*, a poetry of 'little dramas' which 'derail[s]' storylines (and readers), often delivered by 'simple-minded' speakers, who, in their marginalization from a mixed-up world, manage to affect us in a poetry that reconfigures the modern American lyric.

2 Rajeev S. Patke, 'Poetic Knowledge', *Theory, Culture and Society* 23 (2006): 199.

3 See Tate's poems 'Dear Reader', *OHH* 87, and 'The Fragrant Cloud', *RET* 40.

4 See 'Color in the Garden', *WCF* 73, and 'Smart', *SG* 56 (both of which will be discussed later).

Awards, Honours, and Influence

For much of the past five decades, James Tate has been a mainstay on the American poetry scene. In 1967, at the age of twenty-three, he published his first collection, *The Lost Pilot*, as winner of the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award, the preeminent prize of its time. As a measure of just how well his first book was received, Julian Symons in *New Statesmen* wrote how he turned with ‘pleasure’ to Tate after reviewing Anne Sexton, William Carlos Williams, and James Dickey. He then went on to single Tate out as the ‘most distinctive’ when considered in relation to Donald Justice and John Ashbery.⁵

After such an auspicious beginning, Tate continued publishing regularly through the 1970s and into the 1980s, with books appearing frequently, every one to three years. Though occasionally delving into linguistic experimentation (most noticeable in *Hints to Pilgrims* (1971), parts of *Absences* (1972), and the prose-poetry of *Hottentot Ossuary* (1974)), most of the work confirmed his already established signature style: anecdotal, tragicomic, ‘romantic’ and ‘anti-poetic’. I borrow these last two terms from Wallace Stevens, who, of course, was not writing about Tate, but brought them together in his Preface to William Carlos Williams’s early *Collected Poems*. The seemingly antithetical terms are especially applicable to Tate, since his poetry, like Williams’s, exists within the context of romantic and ‘*surréaliste*’ poetries. Again, writing about Williams, Stevens tells us: ‘the essential poetry is the result of the conjunction of the unreal and the real, the sentimental and the anti-poetic, the constant interaction of two opposites.’⁶ Tate’s exploration and exploitation of sentimentality, especially

- 5 Julian Symons, ‘Moveable Feet’, *New Statesman* (16 June 1967): 849. Symons writes: ‘Mr. Tate seemed to me the most distinctive of them [Justice and Ashbery], an ironical, original self-absorbed poet who glances with amusement at love, humanity, himself.’
- 6 Wallace Stevens, preface, *William Carlos Williams Collected Poems 1921–1931* (1934), collected in *Wallace Stevens: Opus Posthumous* (New York: Vintage, 1957): 254–257. I cite Stevens despite his disclaimer that his argument ‘is not to be taken as an

in his love poems, is counter-balanced with, what Stevens' calls, the 'externals' of what it means to be anti-poetic: 'specimens of abortive rhythms, words on several levels, ideas without logic, and similar minor matters'. Williams, and indeed Stevens too, for the later writer's celebration of the imagination, serve as fore-fathers to Tate. And certainly, Tate builds upon their tradition to become one of the leading voices of what in the 1960s and 1970s was once commonly called 'neo-surrealism'.⁷ As a clarifying measure of Tate's own influence, Mark Jarman wrote in the early 1990s how '[Tate's] style, in the 1960s and early 1970s, spawned more imitators per little magazine page than any before in America', noting thereafter that 'it now exists solely in the master's hands'.⁸

Though reviews of Tate's work remained common enough through the 1970s, by the 1980s the Academy had become increasingly divided over the merit of his work, resulting in some lean years in terms of award and recognition (that said, by this point Tate was a long-tenured Professor in the English Department at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, where he still teaches).⁹ With the publication of his *Selected Poems* (1991), and, not incidentally, John Ashbery's rallying call in the form of an encomium on the back cover, a charge occurred to begin reading Tate as a major poet. As Ashbery wrote: 'It allows us finally to take the measure of his genius: passionate, humane, funny, tragic, and always surprising and mind-delighting. Not unexpectedly, it confirms his standing as one of the finest voices of his generation.'¹⁰ Tate's *Selected Poems* won both the Pulitzer Prize and the William Carlos Williams Award in 1992, and the 1990s became a golden

attempt to define anyone or anything else', not least of all an unborn poet of a future generation.

7 See Joshua Clover, 'James Tate and the Problems of Selection', *Denver Quarterly* 33.3 (Fall 1998): 55.

8 Mark Jarman, 'The Curse of Discursiveness', *The Hudson Review* 45.1 (1992): 162.

9 In 1976 Tate won awards from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. Little recognition came in the 1980s.

10 John Ashbery, encomium, *Selected Poems* by James Tate (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1991): back cover.

age of production and recognition, garnering Tate the National Book Award for *Worshipful Company of Fletchers* (1994) and culminating in the Academy of American Poets' Tanning Prize for Lifetime Achievement in 1995.¹¹ In 2001, he was appointed a Chancellor to the Academy, and today, fifteen major collections and numerous small press books into his career, Tate is a senior member of the American poetry scene.

If in some part, the contemporary American aesthetic is marked by its willingness to bring the mundane or the trivial to bear in its subject, as well as a dissociationism that affects language, image, and storyline, Tate's lasting influence is easily identifiable. One might cite the new generation of American poets who bear Tate's influence including, amongst others, Matthew Roher, Mark Yakich, and Matthew Zapruder. But it is not just the younger generation of poets who Tate has inclined, but canonized members of the contemporary academy, as has long been noted of that strongest of supporters, Ashbery.¹² Though this study is not dedicated to comparing Tate to Ashbery (or even in comparing their receptions), many readers will note just how much Tate sounds like Ashbery at select moments in both poetry and interview. David Young follows his understanding that Tate's surrealist practice 'begins at the level of language' by telling us 'in this respect he is somewhat like John Ashbery.'¹³ And Cate Parish writes 'Part of the pleasure of reading [Tate] lies in his marvelous ear for tones of voice and his feel for rhetorical power [...] like Ashbery, but

11 Ashbery, as one of the judges, issued another glowing endorsement of Tate. The Academy of American Poets' Tanning Prize is now called the Wallace Stevens Award.

12 See Calvin Bedient for reference to Ashbery's debt to Tate: 'Five Notes on American Poetry', *Metre* 7/8 (Spring/Summer 2000): 28. Bedient, alas, believes Ashbery's work 'suffer[s]' for the influence, since he reads Tate as a 'lesser poet'. A separate aside: the long-lauded British poet Simon Armitage, in his most recent collection *Seeing Stars* (2010), bears a resemblance to recent Tate, as does another British poet, Luke Kennard, whose career has started with similar kudos, in his being named the youngest poet to be shortlisted for the Forward Prize for poetry.

13 David Young, 'The Naturalizing of Surrealism', *Field: Contemporary Poetry and Poetics* 36 (1987): 99.

Tate is more accessible.¹⁴ Certainly, Ashbery's later lyrics can be compared to Tate's for their humours and arcane tropes, but it is difficult to identify a single Ashbery poem, or even a single Ashbery phase which corresponds to Tate's poetry and/or phase. If one were to attempt such, Ashbery's book-length poem *Flow Chart* probably wouldn't be the poetry one would want to cite; and yet, David Herd writes about *Flow Chart* in terms which are both usefully relevant and contrary to Tate's project: 'Because the poet is keen, desperate even (so it seems at times) somehow to ensure that his poetry will outlast him, *Flow Chart* can often be heard straining against itself: testing and hoping to overcome the limits and possibly devastating implications of its occasional poetic approach.'¹⁵ Albeit on a much lesser scale than the 208-page *Flow Chart*, many of Tate's 1–2-page poems very much strain against themselves, testing their own limits, often involving characters, speakers or narrators, whose plight is geared toward their will to overcome the devastating implications of their own inabilities with language, or indeed, their inability to function within the world of the poem they're creating. But where as Herd writes of this as stemming from Ashbery's keenness to ensure an ever-lasting poetry, Tate is decidedly more *c'est la vie*. Certainly, he cares about poetry, but his investment in posterity is less determined.

Or to put it another way, where Ashbery's 'seriousness of purpose' can be appealing to critics, Tate's flippancy and irreverence can be problematic.¹⁶ As Grey Gowrie writes, 'where Ashbery is chaos-theoretical [...] with ideas meeting perceptions of actuality [...] Tate is all alert, dandy-like play.'¹⁷ Chris

- 14 Cate Parish, 'The Wonderful World of James Tate,' review of *Selected Poems*, by James Tate, *Poetry London Newsletter* 29 (Spring 1998): 27.
- 15 David Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000): 210. Herd later writes about this poem in terms which continue to be relevant to Tate: '[*Flow Chart*] is [...] primarily a work of the ordinary'.
- 16 Chris Stroffolino, entry on James Tate, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 169 (Detroit: Gale, 1997): 283. As I'll discuss later, Helen Vendler writes a particularly dismissive review of Tate's *Viper Jazz*, collected in her book *Part of Nature, Part of Us* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).
- 17 Grey Gowrie, 'Child's Play in the Pen of Adult Emotions,' review of *Selected Poems*, by James Tate, *Daily Telegraph* (9 Aug. 1997): A2.

Stroffolino elaborates on this when he tells us ‘Tate, unlike John Ashbery, is not visionary enough to be included in Harold Bloom’s controversial Western canon.’¹⁸ Ashbery, of course, is *many* poets – trackable perhaps in his evolution from one book to the next – while Tate is very much *one* poet, of (for the most part) relatively constant aesthetic and subject from the 1960s to the present. Tate’s often anecdotal poetry means he’s not as pertinently postmodern or avant-garde as Ashbery, which means it’s easy to put Tate in that nether region of reception, just left of mainstream but not left enough to be in the break-out camp of experimenters like Ashbery, or indeed the Language Poets of the early 1970s. Where Ashbery’s well-documented difficulty has spawned an entire critical industry, Tate is only here getting his first monograph. And to try to engage Tate, we find, is to encounter similar difficulties to those we have when engaging the esotericism of Ashbery. It’s also, to some extent, to ask the same questions of the work.¹⁹

The Difficulty of Reading Critically

This first monograph on the poetry of James Tate comes in the wake of the edited collection of essays *On James Tate* by Brian Henry (2004), and the earlier appreciation of Tate’s work introduced by Lee Upton, guest editor of a special edition of *Denver Quarterly* dedicated to Tate in 1998. One of Tate’s most constructive critics, Upton’s sense of just why Tate has rarely been engaged ‘in depth and at length’ is still valid over ten years later. Her list of reasons include the suggestion that: ‘perhaps his enterprise and the enterprise of criticism are at odds [...] Tate has not offered a fully articulated aesthetic program [...] nor has he allied himself in a school with other

18 Stroffolino, entry on James Tate, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*: 283.

19 For more on Ashbery’s reception and the difficulty with addressing his poetic, see David Herd’s introduction to *John Ashbery and American Poetry*.

poets.' She also offers the idea that 'with his affection for the seemingly trivial, his refusal to be portentous, Tate offers a poetic that rejects any stabilizing theory.'²⁰ Both of these comments reinforce the very common idea that Tate's work is difficult to engage critically, not only by one-time reviewers, but by those who have given significant attention to Tate over the years, such as the following. In David Young's review-article of Tate's 1991 *Selected Poems*, he consistently reminds readers that Tate's poetry 'is volatile stuff, and one comments on it gingerly, aware that one may be missing the point even in the act of judging it or interpreting it.'²¹ When one does go forward and articulate a critical opinion a retraction can follow, as in Donald Revell's 1998 recantation of his 1987 criticism: 'I mistook innovations for variations. I mistook delight for mania I wronged the dancer and the dance.'²² In one of the most ambitious and closest readings of Tate's early long poem 'Absences', Louis Gallo muses on the relationship between Tate's readers and his poetry, only to relay his 'hunch that Tate forces his readers to remain silent and whole or outspoken and schizophrenic.' 'To write an article on "Absences"', he tells us, 'is tantamount to *choosing* schizophrenia.'²³

To return to Upton: '[H]ow does one write about a poetry that seems to defy all earnest exposition and performs the most uncanny sleight of hand? What sort of sly disruptions are necessary to meet Tate's own affronts to expectation?'²⁴ Like Henry's edited collection of essays, this book aims to be a 'corrective' to the 'intellectually lazy' criticism which has dogged Tate's career.²⁵ Unlike Henry's collection, however, as a monograph this

20 Lee Upton, 'The Poet Out of Place: James Tate', *Denver Quarterly* 33.3 (Fall 1998): 118.

21 David Young, 'The Naturalizing of Surrealism', *Field: Contemporary Poetry and Poetics* 36 (Spring 1987): 100.

22 Donald Revell, 'Transience Becalmed: Writings about Writing about James Tate', *Denver Quarterly* 33.3 (Fall 1998): 109.

23 Louis Gallo, 'James Tate's "Absences": A Reading', *Concerning Poetry* 11.1 (1978): 47.

24 Upton, preface, *Denver Quarterly* 33.3 (Fall 1998): 6.

25 Brian Henry, preface to *On James Tate*, ed. Brian Henry (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004): viii.

book hopes to address the continuum of Tate's work via major themes and concerns. In looking for 'answers' of course, one finds more 'questions', and this book is about exposing the difficulties of engaging Tate's work as much as anything else. The three major goals are thus: 1) to confront Tate's 'affronts' via close readings of poems and so to offer practical reading strategies, 2) to reconcile Tate's poetic play with his work's intense humanism, and 3) to expose his capricious way with imagination and craft as existing within a framework of various literary and philosophical contexts. In order to do this, it's necessary to expand on Henry's summation of 'opinions' so to offer a more complete overview of Tate's reception. For, on the superficial level of a casual reading, most of Tate's poems are not difficult to appreciate at all, which means a great irony begins to become appreciated. Less analytical reviews, for example, are quick to cite the humour, accessibility, and entertaining quality of the poetry: 'The precision of Tate's imagination and its energetic expression makes the surfaces of his poems effervescent, better than champagne mixed with Alka-Seltzer', writes one reviewer²⁶. Things only become problematic when one tries to probe further into the craft and meaning of the work.

There is a relative consensus that those aspects that roughly get lumped under Tate's 'surrealism' make critical interpretation problematic. Tate's poems often resist a diagrammatic movement toward resolution; in addition to being fragmented and/or discursive, they are willfully evasive in their circumlocution. When a narrative is established, often it is aborted, or at least momentarily interrupted. His poetry moves haphazardly, flitting about and around the notion of a subject via a miscellany of successive, usually disparate, even arbitrary images. Further, language play is often relentless, leaving some reviewers to understand his poetry as 'a matter of random linguistic effects strung together any which way.'²⁷ Personae have a penchant for clichés (literalized or transfigured), and may riddle them off to nonsensical effect:

26 Amy Gerstler, 'Lively Language', *Los Angeles Times Book Review* (27 Nov. 1994): 2.

27 David Dooley, 'The Life of Literature: Two Views', *The Hudson Review* 45.4 (1993): 537.

'Good riddance to bad rubbish!
and 'I'm sorry if I was a menace!
'Howdy doody, milkman travail!
'So long buoys and grills.'
(*'From the Hole'*, *OHH* 55)

Other poems offer progression by puns (homonyms or homophones), 'All it wanted was a fair shake, or a chocolate shake' ('A Glowworm, a Lemur, and Some Women', *WCF* 44); or extensions of the idiom, 'We were out of our league. We belonged in little league / uniforms, but we couldn't afford them' ('Autosuggestion: USS North Carolina', *WCF* 6); or conjugations of opposites, 'This left us free of debt / and free of riches' ('Autosuggestion', *WCF* 6); or non-referential words 'My, that is a lovely dictionary you have on, Mrs. Smith' ('Shut Up and Eat Your Toad', *SG* 24); or continually shift the verbal register, 'Pass the sweet, Salty, it is morning: / the streets are tilted and rocky' ('The Life of Poetry', *RD* 31).

'One could call the poem hermetic except that hermeticism [...] requires an internally coherent system', writes David Dooley in response to Tate's 'surrealism of language.'²⁸ Fred Muratori questions: 'Inspired nonsense or linguistic breakthrough? Anybody's guess.'²⁹ And James Finn Cotter believes that '[m]any of Tate's poems make sense only if they are seen as performances, to be heard not understood.'³⁰ Tate himself nicely summarizes what his playing with language does to the reader:

Setting [...] language in motion unsettles the reader in a deep way. The reader thinks that the poem is making a statement and then all of a sudden the poem insists that the reader think about words, not about content. All of a sudden the poem is not

28 Ibid. Dooley is troubled by Tate's 'surrealism of language' since he believes it does not reveal 'surreal aspects of the world we live in'. This seems an odd statement since Tate's poetry shows us how language, itself, is one of the most surreal aspects of our world.

29 Fred Muratori, review of *Reckoner* by James Tate, *Library Journal* 112.1 (Jan. 1987): 91.

30 James Finn Cotter, 'Poetry, Ego, and Self', *The Hudson Review* 33.1 (Spring 1980): 141.

going to deliver a neatly packaged message; the reader is going to have to do some work.³¹

A reader might hear in this the echo of a Derridean post-structuralist, the call to *deconstruction*. Tate can be a cagey writer at times, manipulating reader-writer relations with his own declared desire for poetry to be read in a particular way. Certainly the relationship between reader and writer becomes even more complicated when one considers that Tate's poetry often deliberately resists being understood in terms of classification or meaning. Chapter 2 will explore in detail just how Tate's work is wary of critical intervention, and manifests in his regularly satirizing and challenging 'the expert'. Instead, as Lee Upton well argues, Tate has a history of aligning himself with the 'amateur, the pointedly inexpert'.³² His distrust of literary criticism, in particular, and 'theory' in general, becomes clear in poems which dramatically render the irreconcilable relationship between poetry and expert readers. The allegorical meta-poem 'Color in the Garden' expresses it in no uncertain terms: 'A theory popularized by some/ could not be a greater fallacy' (*WCF* 73). Again and again, Tate positions himself as writing on aesthetic grounds – against 'purpose' and in pursuit of 'beauty' – revealing a Kantian core. This is made explicit throughout his collections, and dramatized as a project to thwart reader expectations. Richard Jackson even finds that Tate's linguistic play 'undermines the validity of classification.' He tells us 'the aim of this subversion is to shake the reader loose from cultural givens.'³³ James Harms elaborates: 'part of the point [...] is to frustrate interpretation, to insist on a sort of surrender: to

31 Tate, 'Interview with Richard Jackson (1982)', *The Route as Briefed* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999): 159.

32 Upton, *Muse*: 106.

33 Richard Jackson's statement appears in Tate's 'Interview with Richard Jackson (1982)', *Route* 159. Jackson's full quote reads: 'There's a recent issue of *Yale French Studies* that discusses surrealist tendencies, defining them not as a decadent decomposition but as "a runaway cross-referenced encyclopedic indexing whose first step is to undermine the validity of classification." The aim of this subversion is to shake the reader loose from cultural givens, to deconstruct set paradigms. What this means for your own work is a language of non sequiturs, contradictions, literalized figures of speech, the

an unstable universe, to chaos enacted lovingly in language, to a perpetual present that is somehow in a state of temporal flux.³⁴

All of this contributes to the humour, or the 'clowning' of Tate's poetry, as David Young refers to it:

critical discourse seems to be uneasy in the presence of [...] clowning; there's a tendency to want to look past it, to ignore it, to get Jack back in the box. The critic as ringmaster can control the presentation of the animal acts and trapeze artists; when the clowns arrive, a primitive energy breaks loose, and authority must retire.³⁵

This aspect of Tate's humour revels in the incongruous, the presentation of the wholly unpredictable. This may take its form in odd similes, strange plot lines, or alternatively anti-climactic or punchline endings that disrupt the thematic register. A whole or logical story is deliberately resisted, forcing the reader to note the nuances of dissimilar elements.

Mark Ford well sums up the difficulties of a poetry that undermines reading conventions:

[Tate's] goofy anecdotes, surreal lyrics, and metaphysical meditations are all characterized by a treacherous instability; at any moment the poem may succumb to the arbitrary dictates of some unfathomable syntax, and what appeared to be solid ground prove merely quicksand.³⁶

When critics start sinking in the quicksand of Tate's poetry, their struggle often becomes the dominant subject of their review. Either that, or next time out, they stay clear of the quicksand of Tate's poetry altogether.

use of words such as *like* and *or* to point out the differences and uncertainty within classifications.⁷

34 James Harms, 'Clarity Instead of Order: The Practice of Postmodernism in the Poetry of James Tate', *Denver Quarterly* 33.3 (Fall 1998): 82.

35 David Young, 'Some Huge Pageant', *Field: Contemporary Poetry and Poetics* 46 (1992): 75.

36 Mark Ford, 'Crazy Orbiting', *Times Literary Supplement* (29 Aug. 1997): 26.