‘I SENT MY LOVE TO THE SHOWERS’: SURREALISM, LOVE AND POSTURE IN THE POETRY OF JAMES TATE

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Though it is nice to imagine that poetry provides a relative safe haven for personal musing, contemporary love poetry, perhaps more than any other type of poetry, exposes a chasm in reader-writer relations. This has something to do with a post-Romantic readership’s search for the emotion behind a text, and yet, the same readership’s awareness that private feelings in public forums can be either exclusionary, embarrassing, or both (which amounts to being politically incorrect). In a time particularly sensitive to gender biases, one might read traditional patriarchal expressions of love/sexuality/desire into a work if an author makes his, or for that matter, her, case too strongly (for example, pornographic, phallocentric), weakly (insipid, sentimental), or gender-specifically (with all the sarcasm the terms ‘manly’ or ‘womanly’ can connote). This does not apply simply to confessionalist poetry or that which explicitly invokes a love object, but that poetry which declaims and emotively meditates on love in abstraction as well: even this poetry expresses the making or the breaking of a lover’s psyche.

Moving through the ranks of nineteenth- and twentieth-century poets, one finds the contemporary male poet, in particular, has learned how to explore love from those as varied as Walt Whitman, T.S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Pablo Neruda, André Breton, Theodore Roethke, and John Berryman. The context of these writers, of course, is highly selective, so much so that it points to the title subject of this essay almost exclusively: the contemporary American poet, James Tate. Though I do not mean to imply that Tate has only been
influenced by male poets. I do want the context to serve as extending an expression of masculinity; that is, male poets have, throughout time, engendered literature not only to speak to male needs but also to the male need to be heard. Though this might imply that the male need to be heard is necessarily one of euphoric rhetoric (beating love out of bloated chests), in fact I am interested here in declarations of ‘unlove’, of painful emotional longing, of displaced sexuality.

From the late 1960s to the present, James Tate has written an unashamedly despairing love poetry. Winner of the Yale Series of Younger Poets Prize when he was twenty-two, Tate published his first book, The Lost Pilot, in the spring of 1967, just before the summer of love. One might think that a twenty-two-year-old American, especially one of counter cultural concerns as Tate was, might be writing a poetry promoting the free love of the time, but all too often Tate’s work engaged with love as something remote and removed, a victim of sorts to a view of prevailing cynicism. Certainly, melancholy abounds: ‘Love is not worth so much; / I regret everything’ begins one poem; likewise, ‘“Peggy?” [our host] said. “There’s no one here by that name.”’ And so my lovelife began’ ends another. This, however, is not as desperate as it sounds since, more often than not, Tate’s lovers foster a wry comedy in their misfortune and ill-expression. It is worth noting that for a poet who has received numerous awards, culminating in the 1990s with a Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the Tanning Prize for Lifetime achievement from the Academy of American Poets, Tate’s work has not been received with as much critical industry as might be expected.

Lee Upton, one of Tate’s best critics, considers the question of why this might be in a special edition of Denver Quarterly dedicated to Tate, summing up the critical trepidation with: ‘How does one write about a poetry that seems to defy all earnest exposition and performs the most uncanny sleight of hand?’ Though Tate’s work defies

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1 Lee Upton, for instance, rightly notes Tate’s debt to Emily Dickinson (see Lee Upton, The Muse of Abandonment, Hopewell: NJ, 1999).
2 ‘Coda’, ll. 1-2, in James Tate, Selected Poems, Hanover: NH, 1991, 44; Tate, ‘Peggy in the Twilight’, ll. 16-17, in James Tate, Distance from Loved Ones, Hanover: NH, 1990, 4.