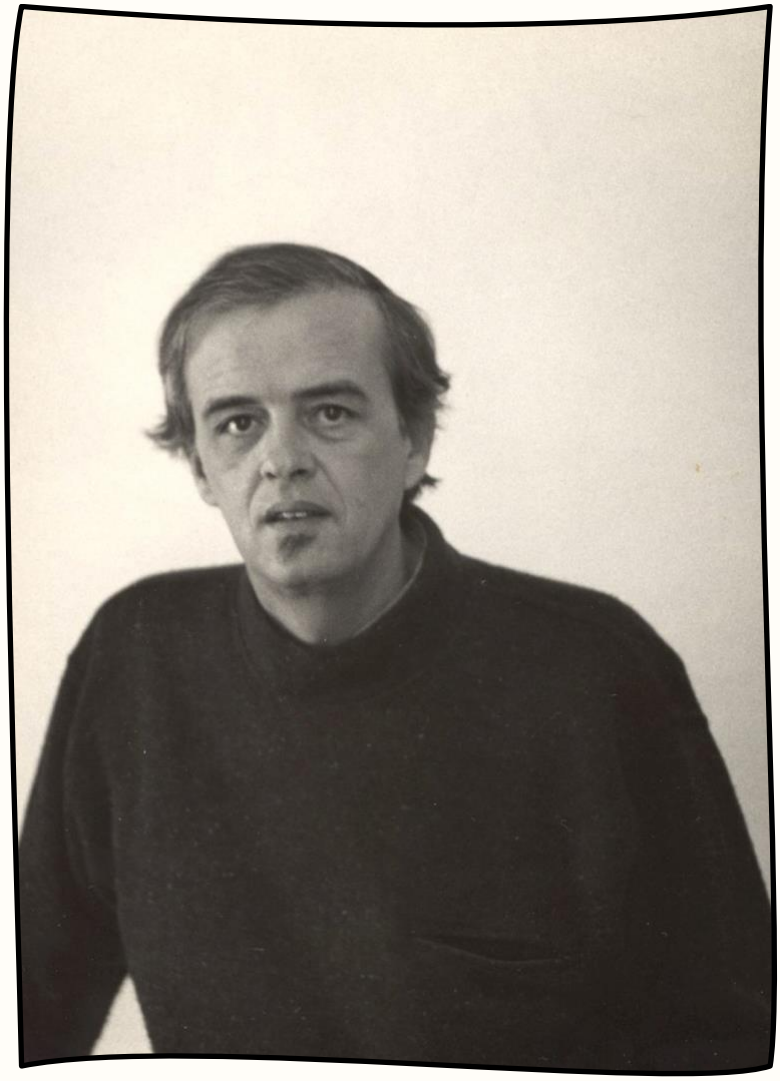
James Tate: Selected Poems, Wesleyan University Press

Persona as Protagonist?

Textual Multiplicity and the Staging of Authorial Identity on a Singular Narrative Screen



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Abstract

The correlation under consideration is peculiar yet intriguing. This paper interrogates the question: Can we be living at the movies through text? Can the experience of cinema be transposed into the act of reading? Thus, more pointedly, can a literary persona function analogously to a cinematic protagonist? This is particularly fascinating when examining an author whose oeuvre spans from 1967 to 1986—a temporal breadth that invites analysis of the evolving self-representation across disparate tonal registers. Thus, I postulate, Tate's oscillation between the surrealist, the whimsical stoic, and satirical flair, all while reposing in the breath of the very wind he constructs with his imprecision, constructs a composite authorial voice that performs as a protagonist upon the single screen that is authorial life. Can we then watch his persona as we would an actor? Is the suggested "framed narrative" too speculative that I ought to settle for the author as a traveler to and from actor and autobiographer? This essay endeavors to examine these possibilities, ultimately inviting the reader to reach their own conclusions regarding the theatrical dimensions of authorial identity.

Depicting Self: Improvisation to Interrogated Performance

In the book *Viper Jazz* (1976), Tate, much like jazz itself, adopts an improvisational register, moving without linear structure across poems that are often thematically disconnected. The absurdity embedded in this form is anticipated by the title "Viper," a term drawn from 1930s slang for marijuana, thereby drawing a deliberate parallel between the intoxicated, surrealist elements of jazz culture and his poetic method. This improvisational sensibility is most evident in the structure of the poem *Read the Great Poets*, where Tate shifts unexpectedly from stanzas to paragraphs. He concludes one stanza with the end-stopped line, "...she longs for." before abruptly transitioning to "There's a certain point in each evening..."—a narrative pivot that appears to gesture toward an external observational space, as though exiting the mind. The poem opens with the statement "what is life without good music," notably omitting a question mark, which suggests not inquiry but assertion, a thought that resists making meaning in favor of simply being. This shift breaks his idiosyncratic resistance into prose. One might ask: how would such a movement, from interiority to exterior perception, be visualized on screen? What would it mean to observe thought without narrating it? The answer, perhaps, lies in Tate's use of incongruous humor, which performs the transition through tonal fracture.

In the same collection, in *On the Subject of Doctors*, he declares, "who gets to see the most sex organs in the world, not poets," only to pivot abruptly into reflection on "doctors who are dying" from substance abuse, an irony underlined by his claim to take his "plastic medicine seriously." Even within such improvisation, Tate cultivates

emotional depth, suggesting that, much like music, comedy, and reality exist in political alignment. The result is a kind of polemical irony, one that demands the reader hold competing realities at once, producing a dissonant yet melodic tension that functions as both critique and comedic relief.

This philosophical wandering continues in *Marfa*, where he opens with melancholic detachment, referring to himself as an "alias", a term intimating a fragmented and unrooted self. Tate extends this through a mythopoetic lens, stating he is "consoled by this hole" where there was once "a rope around the wilderness." The image introduces the scenic aesthetic of an American cinematic wasteland, framing *Marfa* as symbolic of ruin, a relic of personal failure. In doing so, Tate parodies the postmodern man: painfully self-aware of his performance yet still craving resolution. He collapses oedipal categories with the line, "My beautiful wife! Or was it my mother?" marking the rupture in the speaker's development. Even as he uses humor to mask this loss, through phrases like "wall of death edumation" set against "manic blue flowers," the invented word "edumation" becomes a satirical token for superficial learning. His likening of the blue flowers to mania mocks their supposed intellectual authority, creating irony between their performative gravity and actual triviality.

Despite the humor, the broken form surrounding it traces a deeper psychic fracture. The repetition of "Marfa" mirrors a breakdown, a spiraling into absence. Here, Tate loses the voice of authority and becomes spectral, neither author nor protagonist. Instead, he becomes an indirect autobiographer and, through his refusal to identify with either pole, reveals the invisibility and ambiguity of his state.

Contrastingly, in *Constant Defender* (1983), Tate abandons the autoschediastic arrangements that characterize *Viper Jazz* and instead undertakes a deliberate interrogation of his performative role as an actor within his own melancholy. Could Tate himself be the parody? In *Tell them ____ was here*, he introduces the idea of being mocked by an unnamed observer, one who remarks that he "got there on time… where are they?". From "peering" through the window and seeing "no life," we receive a persona situated in a barren land, whose only sprinkle is an imagined "green" and a self-curated sense of importance. He "scratched" out his name and "wrote it back again," suggesting he is the architect of his own meaning. Unlike in *Marfa*, where he attempts to gain dominion over a disintegrating structure through humour, here he not only linguistically concedes but also structurally stages the experience of loss embedded within his reality. He performs the labour of curating significance for himself.

This scope broadens in *Blue Spill*, where he wades "deeper into the accident area." The alliterative construction inaugurates a mythic velocity, plunging the reader into the density of loss with the haunting duality of "a fatherless son and sonless father." This line undoubtedly recalls the personal history of Tate: his father, a B-17 co-pilot, perished in combat in 1944, when Tate was merely five months old.[1] Though Tate's

[1] Itzkoff, D. (2015, July 10). James Tate, prolific Pulitzer-winning poet, dies at 71. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/11/books/james-tate-prolific-pulitzer-winning-poet-dies-at-71.html

legacy is marked by a proclivity for comic relief, in *Constant Defender,* he decisively suspends this tendency. In a prior interview, he stated:

> *"I love my funny poems, but I'd rather break your heart. And if I can do both in the same poem, that's the best. If you laughed earlier in the poem, and I bring you close to tears in the end, that's the best."*[2]

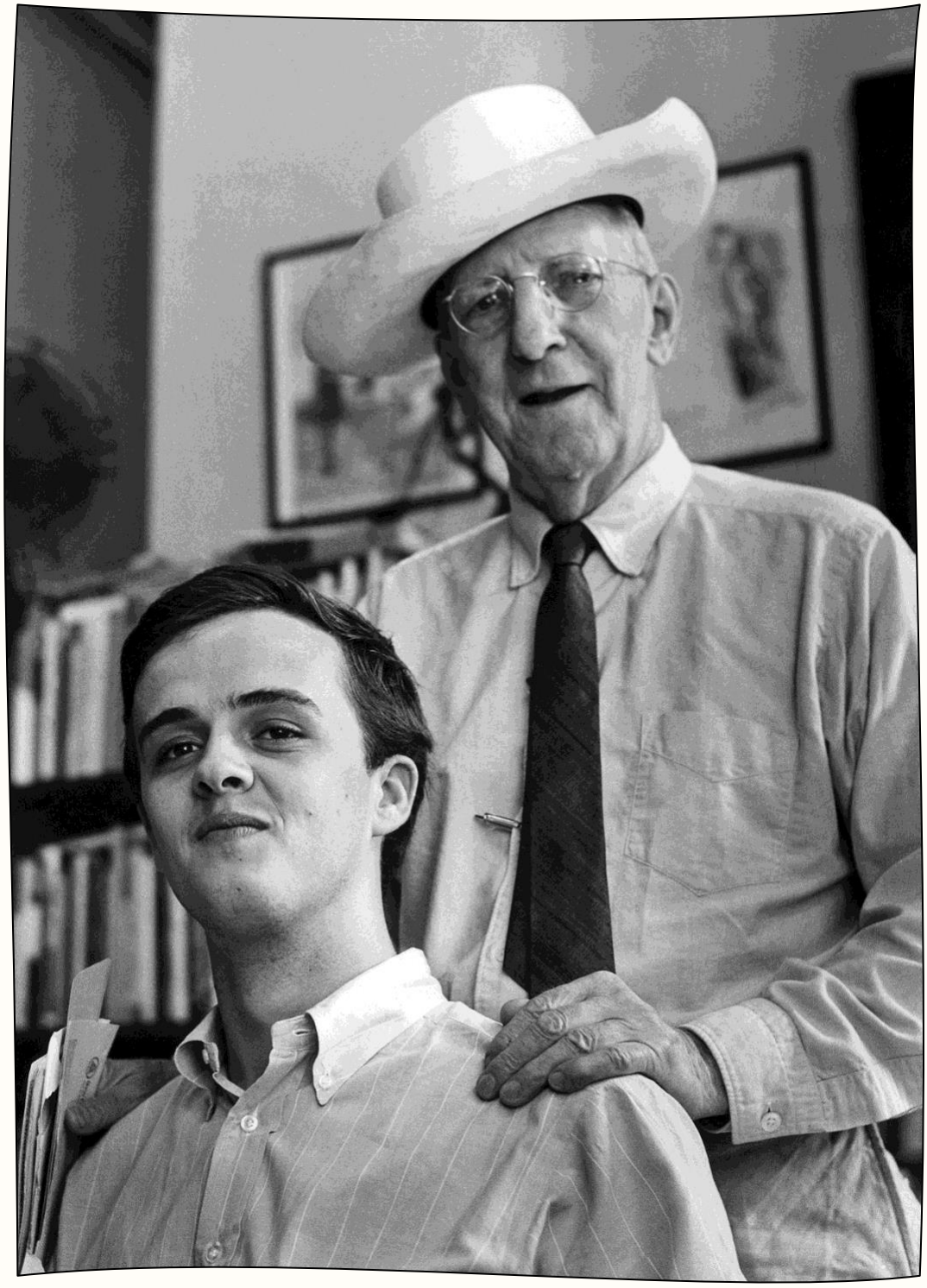
This interplay of humour and heartbreak is present, yet here, he lingers in the gravity of grief. The temporal distance between that quote and this collection suggests a possible evolution in perspective. Where is he situated on the cinematic stage of his own life? Perhaps within the "blue," he later discusses.

Tate introduces the covenantal imagery, "he is now betrothed to the blue," implying that his father has become one with the personified sorrow. The "beret," "aura and dream," and "eyes" are all blue, submerging the reader into the despondency often associated with the colour, one that provokes visions of swimming over the very waters into which his father's plane crashed. Is this where the persona's voice is located on screen? Is he the protagonist acting upon these waters?

The most poignant line is "blue is blue all through," emerges as a final illumination, described as the "light" that is "home at last." This phrasing is particularly resonant as it suggests that he has become one with this blue, tethered to his father through a chromatic mourning that unfolds as both setting and subject. In this way, Tate authors himself into the very protagonist we are invited to observe, an evolving self, carried

[2] Poetry Foundation. (n.d.). *James Tate*. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/james-tate

through the space of the text by his commitment to vulnerability in *Constant Defender*.



Autobiographer of Condition: Tate Between Loss and Surrealism

Submerged between *Graveyard* and *Intimidations of an Autobiography*, we get the pathos-ridden poem *The Lost Pilot* (1967), structurally sandwiched between death and lineage, introducing from the outset the emotional conflict the poem expresses. *The Lost Pilot* opens somewhat contradictingly, where his father's face "did not rot," and yet the Pilot is "lost." So, where is the face of his father? This introduces the depressive absurdity at play, where a tightly controlled structure of regular tercets pushes back against the growing "dark." Tate appears obsessed with the face, stating "I read your face," "touch your face". This aligns less with physical absence and more with the loss of meaning, which perhaps makes the title "Lost" more about dislocation than disappearance.

Beneath the uncanny undercurrents that resist fixed meaning, Tate still maintains a clear line of storytelling, offering an autobiographical description of his loss with "spinning across the wilds of the sky" and "passing over again." This is not just a recollection but a practicality he continues to live through. This is supported by the critic Dana Giona, who notes: "Although critics immediately noted the surreal elements in *The Lost Pilot*, surely one reason why the book proved so accessible was its autobiographical qualities"[3]—and I concur.

Contrastingly, in *Hints to Pilgrims* (1971), we get a shift from controlled pathos via syntactic control to surreal overflow. This shift mirrors the title, which alludes to old-

[3] *Dana Gioia*. Retrieved from https://danagioia.com/essays/reviews-and-authors-notes/james-tate-and-american-surrealism/

fashioned travel manuals for religious excursions, suggesting not resolution but an ongoing journey, a series of signals toward discovery. This is evident as *Poem* opens with a "silence that tunnels forever," and then the cosmic metaphor of the speaker being "the canary that strangles himself with joy." It becomes clear the persona is no longer actively grieving but rather floating, no longer claims a fixed identity, much like a pilgrim in suspension. This is further complicated in *Lewis and Clark Overheard in Conversation,* a poem that repeats in a grid-like structure: "then we'll get us some wine and spare ribs." One might assume there would be no phone calls on a pilgrimage, but we must remember that Tate is confined to only the "hints" of one. So, what gestures toward the journey here? Perhaps it's the reader's repetition of the line, or the irritation of the overheard conversation—a cultivated monotony Tate himself might be trapped within.

This is perhaps the point to acknowledge that not everything in Tate's work aligns directly with the meaning suggested by its title. It may be here that he functions more as an autobiographer of a poet, rather than one seeking to consume the reader with surrealism, but rather allowing it to function as an expression of his state of mind, as opposed to a curated world we are being prompted to step into. And so, it is reasonable to infer that he is difficult to position within the framed narrative structure aforementioned —I don't know where he lies. Maybe that's the more accurate way to approach him?

Leaping Through the Mind: Constructed Realities

In *The Hottentot Ossuary* (1974), we encounter a markedly different dimension of Tate's poetic practice, where he works exclusively in prose. The term "Hottentot" is an antiquated colonial label historically used to describe the Khoekhoe people of southwestern Africa; it is now widely regarded as pejorative and racist. "Ossuary" refers to a container for human bones, a vessel of death and residual presence. While Tate's specific reasoning for selecting this title remains undocumented and unclear, it is worth foregrounding the implications of the terms themselves, as they prefigure the thematic terrain of the collection.

In the poem *Deadlines*, Tate lurches us into a chaotic internal landscape unmediated by traditional poetic structure. The fluid enjambment inherent to the prose poem format intensifies this descent, drawing us into his spiral. He repeats phrases such as "of course of course" and "in circle in circle" without caesura, and as this syntax collapses, the reader is made to endure the very frustration that Tate enacts. It is thus easy to draw a characterization of a delirious protagonist within his very authorship.

This unstructured descent contrasts with his prose work in *Leaping Woman*, whose title evokes a mythologized, perhaps an archetypal, female figure. She emerges within his dreamscape, and the speaker occupies the position of an observer, watching her arrive in an "ambulance of starlight." She carries a "fantastic disarray" and longs to stand "absolutely still." The question arises: does he observe a frantic woman, or is she the projection of his inner unrest? This ambiguity is particularly resonant when

considering the oxymoronic language surrounding love in the piece; perhaps Tate constructs the idealism he ascribes to her. This could be supported by a 2004 *Paris Review* interview in which he states:

> "*I want to be surprised by what I write. I don't know what I'm going to say next. I write a line, and it suggests the next*."[4]

Such a statement suggests that the boundaries between thought and observation are porous in Tate's process. This fluidity finds conceptual kinship with George Kelly's constructivist psychology, particularly his claim that we interpret the world through "a construction system embracing ordinal relationships between constructs."[5] In this light, Tate's surreal projections may be less world-building than they are cognitive, internal events, shaped through the filters of his perceptual system. This takes me back to the narrative structure in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, perhaps Tate as a protagonist can be defined in synonymity to the very structure and form the movie undertakes!

[4] Tate, J. (2003, Fall). The art of poetry no. 92. *The Paris Review*, (167). https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5636/the-art-of-poetry-no-92-james-tate
[5] George Kelly, *The Psychology of Personal Constructs* (1955), Vol. 1, p. 55

Conclusion

Tate's shifting persona from improvisational surrealist to autobiographer of condition places him in constant motion, swinging between a defined character, an unnamed presence—a narrator who could be read as a protagonist. If reading Tate is like watching a character arc unfold over time on screen, then perhaps that character is not found within a clear narrative structure but in the uncertain spaces of identity, the movement between scenes. Still, for me, the question remains: are we watching a performance unfold, or are we already caught inside the projection of his perception, seated quietly in the theatre of his mind?