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Emersonian Transition in James Tate's The Lost Pilot

No facts are to me sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment,
an endless seeker, with no Past at my back.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles" (EL 412)

When I make the mistake of imagining how a whole poem should
unfold, I immediately want to destroy that plan. Nothing should
supplant the true act of discovery.

—James Tate, "Live Yak Pie" (RAB 1)

Ralph Waldo Emerson's poetry does not carry the same intellectual and musical charge as his prose, yet his theories of poetry—particularly that of transition—acquire special significance when transported into the twentieth century. In his essay, "The Poet," Emerson claims "the quality of the imagination is to flow, and not to freeze" (EL 463). This preoccupation with transition—the prizing of "knowing over knowledge, process over product, activity over object" (Richardson 104)—emerges in several of his most important essays—"Self-Reliance," "Circles," "The American Scholar," "The Poet"—and in various journal entries. While transition usually becomes a matter of style in poetry, it is a philosophical stance for Emerson, who, arguing for the fluidity of the universe in "Circles," asserts, "Permanence is but a word of degrees" (EL 403). This distrust of the fixed transmutes into the paradoxical assertion that "Nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit" (EL 413) later in the essay. Transition's ability to energize the spirit becomes the cornerstone of Emerson's poetics, moving beyond surface style toward more profound concerns. Emerson himself feared what David Porter calls the "static language of the abstract" (41) that mars most of his poems and contravenes his desire for transition. Emerson's self-admonition, "You will sleep out life in this desperate reverie—the purposes for which you live unsought, unfound" (JMN 2: 155), reveals the central role of style in his work. Emerson's praise for transition, then, becomes an assault on stasis—physical, spiritual, and mental inaction.

Many American poets of the twentieth century demonstrate similar attitudes toward stasis in their work. Not least among them is James Tate, whose first book of poetry, *The Lost Pilot* (1967), uses Emersonian transition as a source of energy and power, and dramatizes the obverse—stasis—as a source of enervation and dread while complicating transition by using it to delineate a range of emotions. Throughout *The Lost Pilot*, Tate presents a sustained commitment to the poetics of transition—its stylistic manifestations and its ability to energize the spirit—in such a way that distinguishes the poetry from others who have used transition almost exclusively for stylistic or philosophical purposes. Transition emerges as a source of emotional power in the book. For Tate, style is integral to the act of creation, not ornamental to it. In “Plato; or, the Philosopher,” Emerson remarks on “the experience of poetic creativeness, which is not found in staying at home, nor yet in travelling, but in transitions from one to the other, which must therefore be adroitly managed to present as much transitional surface as possible” (EL 641). Thus, a matter of style becomes a matter of creativity, the one contributing to the other, and the act of communication and the language it generates take precedence over the supposed purpose of communication: the message conveyed.

Remarking on Emerson’s “breakthrough” into lyrical prose (what some have called his “prose poetry”) in “Experience,” Porter describes the essay as “the free-form dance of the thinking mind” with the qualities of “spontaneity and surprise, a form of thought that is in the mind, a form of discovery that is unpredictable” (157). Stephen Fredman, too, sees Emerson’s greatest poetic achievement in his prose, in Emerson’s syntax in particular. In *Poet’s Prose*, Fredman claims that Emerson “located the battleground of speech and writing in the sentence rather than in traditional poetic form.” By doing so, Emerson facilitated in later poets “the generative sentence,” which, Fredman explains, “abandons the normative aspect of completeness, often represented by hypotactic syntax, and instead follows the paratactic organization of speech” (33). The import of the generative sentence is that it “proceeds by the method of discovery” (33), not by a formally dictated or predetermined course. The “discovery” Emerson seeks in his prose, then, is made possible primarily by his prose style, which is characterized by parataxis and resonates with spontaneity. Writing based on the pat-

terns of speech can be exceptionally energetic and open-ended, as Fredman notes: "Speech...drives the writing onward, postponing endings for the sake of ever-renewed (paratactic) beginnings" (35). The language of the dramatic monologue, by emulating speech and pursuing "the paratactic organization of speech," stresses discovery and transition over completeness and stasis. Indeed, the dramatic monologue, through oratorical strategies, "reassert[s] the value of speech and its generative effect" (Fredman 35), becoming a transitional device by virtue of its relationship to speech.

Stemming as it does from speech, the dramatic monologue is an apt mode for a poetics of transition, for it illuminates the flux of a person's thinking rather than the product of a finished thought, the arc and contours of speech rather than the polished statement. While the dramatic monologue appears more frequently in Tate's recent poetry—most consistently and compellingly in *Worshipful Company of Fletchers* (1994) and *Shroud of the Gnome* (1997)—he explicitly employs personae throughout *The Lost Pilot*, engaging the generative sentence and proceeding by discovery rather than following "a formally dictated or predetermined course." More experimental poets rely heavily on transitional strategies, yet these poets rarely dwell in the syntax of speech as it is spoken by a single person. While poems by such poets are often more "realistic"—i.e., mimetic of the ways we receive and perceive information—they seldom emanate from a consistent speaker. Tate's monologues are formally more traditional, acknowledging Wordsworth's desire for the lyric poet to be a "man speaking to men" (which should be revised to "a person speaking to people"), although the conversation implied in Wordsworth's statement frequently becomes a communicative impasse in Tate. Like Tate's narrators, "Emerson's orator provides a model of the poet who speaks from the inherently risky moment of lived time, bringing to it a heightened attention to the act of composition" (Fredman 35). Tate's most characteristic monologues court improvisation, an act embraced by many openly experimental poets of the twentieth century. Tate's monologues resist becoming artifacts by virtue of their active thinking: the logic of the language in the poems will not allow for stasis except as a negative element. The goal is not a well-wrought urn but a constant movement within language.

Although paratactic syntax reflects that of informal speech, writing has a long tradition of hypotactic syntax that is not commonly

challenged until the twentieth century. Lines in *The Lost Pilot* such as “You’d call / her a real doll and me a goof-ball” (“Intimidations of an Autobiography” 29), “all // the rummies got babies” (“The Malingerer” 45), and “Rolling at eighty, now ninety...” (“The Sunday Driver in Search of Himself” 48) incorporate slang into the language of poetry, adding the informality of speech to Tate’s lyricism. The most striking occasion for informal language in *The Lost Pilot* is “The Last Letter from Old Kampoukos,” a dramatic monologue narrated by someone who apparently does not have a strong grasp of “standard” English:

I received your nice
and wonderful letter.

We was very happy
to hear from your people.

Well, my friend Aleck,
we feel the same way

about yours people—
because first the distance

is so far away, second
we can’t eforted to make

trips back and ford, it
is not so easy for us.

...

No
doubt nowadays there is

really tough and rough
winter so cold probably

Zero. (58-59)

the word loses the defining function of “pilot”—through death or stasis—the person becomes less of a pilot.) A “lost” pilot, then, is in a state of abeyance as well as a state of transition: Tate’s “lost pilot” father is constantly moving yet absent. This forces the fact of the father’s absence—here equated to death—onto the poet. “The Lost Pilot” also announces another, more pedestrian form of transition: that from childhood to adulthood. Because the father (whose plane was shot down while the poet was in the womb) has been absent from the poet’s life since its beginning, the poet’s confrontation of the father and his absence in the title poem of his first book constitute a transition into knowledge. This transition is more emotional than actual, since the poem isolates an adult moment of anguish, a moment selected and dramatized by the poet for the purposes of the poem.

While the title of Tate’s book calls attention to the potential for a transitional poetics, poetic style is where Tate’s “transitional surfaces” become most apparent. The poems in *The Lost Pilot* make use of the “circular power returning into itself” (“The American Scholar,” EL 55) that Emerson finds in the world. In numerous poems in the book, Tate presents the lyric poem as an act of revolution: he spins language in- and onto itself, privileging the circular over the linear, the kinetic over the static. For Tate, a poem occurs in the moment(s) of transition, not in the moment of arrival. His poems are committed to motion more than anything else, echoing Porter’s claim that “Emerson’s poetic sensibility required new possibilities of motion” (159), which led Emerson to write his most influential (and poetic) prose. Likewise, the most moving poems in *The Lost Pilot* are those that explore the “circular power” of language and corroborate Emerson’s assertion (in “The Poet”) that “all language is vehicular and transitive, and is good, as ferries and horses are, for conveyance” (EL 463). The “vehicular” and “transitive” aspects of language are what make it energetic. “Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition...,” Emerson writes in “Self-Reliance” (EL 271), and *The Lost Pilot* brims with moments of transition that infuse the poems with action. In “The Sunday Driver in Search of Himself,” for example, the Sunday driver is

going
lickety-split, hellbound over

mountains, gullies, and water;

and loving, really loving
every mile of it... (48)

But such action is not a constant in *The Lost Pilot*. Emerson's loathing of "this desperate reverie" reflects Tate's attitude toward stasis in many of his poems (JMN 2: 162). Tate's personae explicitly detest and fear inaction, and his desire for transition appears most strikingly in the title poem of *The Lost Pilot*. The poet addresses his dead father, whose "compulsive orbiting" unnerves the poet: "when I see you... / spin across the wilds of the sky / like a tiny, African god, // I feel dead" (26). The poet "cannot get off the ground," and this failure of motion makes him feel like "the residue of a stranger's life" (27). The absence of movement threatens to ruin the static poet in this elegy, in which the father never stops orbiting,

passing over again,

fast, perfect, and unwilling
to tell me that you are doing
well, or that it was mistake

that placed you in that world,
and me in this; or that misfortune
places these worlds in us. (27)

While it would distort the poem to ignore the other factors contributing to the poet's emotional situation, the problem of transition—of movement—emerges as crucial to his feelings of anguish. Unable to move, he remains separated from what he most wishes to be connected to: his father.

A typically weak element of language—the subjunctive mood—attains a peculiar status in *The Lost Pilot* because of its relationship to transition and stasis. Because that which is expressed in the subjunctive mood does not actually happen, the subjunctive gestures toward possibility, paradoxically remaining in transition indefinitely until the possibility it expresses becomes actuality. The subjunctive mood is hypothetical, contingent, uncertain; its transference

into actuality, its arrival into reality, are far from assured. This makes the subjunctive mood transitional: completion is acknowledged as a possibility but not necessarily attained. The subjunctive can become a site for anxiety because it gestures toward and sometimes yearns for arrival. Anxiety in a poem can energize it when it contributes to the flux of language and thought, but in *The Lost Pilot* the subjunctive mood more frequently recalls absences that diminish the poet more than they invigorate him.

The subjunctive mood is the least energetic of the transitional devices Tate uses, and the least positive. If we return to "The Lost Pilot," we hear the poet slipping into the subjunctive mood and dwelling there over the space of nineteen lines:

If I could cajole
you to come back for an evening,
down from your compulsive

orbiting, I would touch you

...

...I would
touch your face as a disinterested

scholar touches an original page.
However frightening, I would
discover you and I would not

turn you in. (26-27)

The presence of the subjunctive mood tells us that the poet does not cajole his father to descend, does not touch him or discover him or decide not to turn him in. It is this dwelling in the subjunctive mood that causes the poet such anxiety and sadness: "You // could return to your crazy / orbiting, and I would not try / to fully understand what // it means to you" (27). The possibility implied by the subjunctive mood here becomes both resignation and grief. Because the poet's father never ceases his "compulsive orbiting," he cannot return to it, and the poet feels compelled to "fully understand" what he cannot understand, this orbiting being separate from him.

In the book's corollary to "The Lost Pilot," "For Mother on Father's Day," the subjunctive mood again displays a transitional state weighted with emotion. Until the ending, the poem dwells in declarative statements; its beginning introduces the mother/son relationship as a reversal of convention: "You never got to recline / in the maternal tradition, / I never let you" (8). Claiming he controls the dynamics of their relationship, the poet has forbidden his mother from acting like a mother. The wording of that enjoinder—"You never got to recline"—indicates the poet's anxiety about stasis: if his mother reclines "in the maternal tradition," she, like the poet's father, might disappear, though for different reasons. By claiming that "neither of us ever had / a counterpart in the way / familial traditions go" (8), the son can distance himself from his mother and therefore have less to lose. The poet twists the terms of their relationship such that "I was your brother, / and you were my unhappy / neighbor" (8). This repudiation of the mother's maternity—which is central to her identity as his "mother" if not as a person—is devastating. When "For Mother on Father's Day" is considered beside "The Lost Pilot," the poet's refusal of his mother as his "mother" in effect orphans him.

"For Mother on Father's Day" closes with a subjunctive statement that is all the more powerful for being subjunctive. After asserting, "I pitied you / the way a mother pities / a son's failure" (8), the poet claims, "I would have / lent you sugar, mother" (8). These lines' veneer of irony and lack of apparent emotion actually increase the poem's emotional intensity. Because the poet has rejected his mother and described her as his "unhappy neighbor," the poem's final gesture, lending sugar (an identifiably neighborly gesture), practically obliterates whatever maternalism the mother has left. Yet the gesture is merely that: because of the subjunctive mood, the poet does not lend sugar to his mother, and because it occurs in the past tense ("would have lent"), he never will lend or have lent her sugar. The distance between them cannot be bridged, and the poet reacts to that realization with mock gravity. The subjunctive also leaves the poem open-ended because it implies a continuation of the sentence. Finally, by ending the poem and that sentence with "mother," the poet asserts her maternity as he denies it. She is his mother, but only in name. The subjunctive mood in these two poems illuminates the absences that the poet must navigate in

The Lost Pilot without succumbing entirely to stasis, a struggle that recalls, and honors, Emerson's own.

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