

On the Responsible Representation of Heroes

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**Abstract**

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This paper offers a contemporary understanding of the term "hero," and examines methods poets use to responsibly engage in the act of heroification, beginning with Homer before moving to work by contemporary poets Terrance Hayes, Tyehimba Jess, and Roger Reeves. Building on the ideas of Allen Grossman, Horace, and Simone Weil, the paper discusses what it means to make heroic figures "weepable" and acknowledgeable using writing, and how to avoid or temper the inevitable objectification that comes with writing poems about real people, even if the poet's intent is to honor.

## On the Responsible Representation of Heroes

Garrett Evans

*"The idea of a person's being a thing is a logical contradiction. Yet what is impossible in logic becomes true in life, and the contradiction lodged within the soul tears it to shreds." -Simone Weil, "The Iliad, or the Poem of Force"*

The classical hero occupies an uncomfortable position in contemporary literary culture: he is named, remembered, and immortalized through language while others are not; and because of this, he is fundamentally misrepresented, reduced to a truncated sequence of his most notable actions and decisions. He is made into a static object by the force of heroification: the hero becomes not a person, but the symbol of a person, representative of his heroic qualities and not his human ones. This type of objectification is present in varying degrees in all written forms that aestheticize the lives of real people, even when the language is meant to honor or complicate our understanding of them in a positive way. The goal of this essay is to explore methods contemporary poets use to successfully temper reductive qualities in order to make heroes feel not like objects or vehicles for the poet's own ends, but complex and sympathetic individuals.

When writing about real people, there must always be some process of selection and curation on the part of the poet: a majority of the person's life will inevitably be omitted and only certain "important" parts chosen; the parts that are chosen can only be represented in an incomplete way based on the poet's decisions and the aesthetic demands of the poem. This

process brings us further from the reality of the person we are writing about; the picture is incomplete. Even the *Iliad* is comprised only of a sequence of vignettes spanning just a few weeks of the life of its characters, including one of poetry's first and most famous heroes, Achilles. Mark Halliday paraphrases this process nicely in a comment made to Allen Grossman: "every choice to include something is a choice to exclude other things (Grossman, 186)."

Despite this type of omission and reduction, there *are* ways for heroification to go right. We know it when we read it. By the end of the *Iliad*, the image of Achilles is not a one dimensional representation of a warrior; it is a complex representation of a person that the reader can identify with, a person whose emotions the reader can actually feel. When Achilles is crushed by the news of his partner Patroclus's death, chills run up our arms and for a moment, we are grieving too:

*A black cloud of grief came shrouding over Achilles.  
Both hands clawing the ground for soot and filth,  
he poured it over his head, fouled his handsome face  
and black ashes settled onto his fresh clean war-shirt.  
Overpowered in all his power, sprawled in the dust,  
Achilles lay there, fallen...  
tearing his hair, defiling it with his own hands.  
(trans. Robert Fagles; Book 18, lines 25-31)*

Here, we feel that god-like Achilles is like us; he is brought to the ground by grief and succumbs to it. The feeling echoes in our bodies when we recognize it. Despite the fact that information about Achilles' character and past are by and large omitted by the poem, by the end we see him as a multi-dimensional, sympathetic human being; someone who is powerful in a stereotypical masculine sense, but also sensitive and sympathetic in a way that feels universal. This multi-dimensionality is even more vividly seen when Achilles is confronted by King Priam, who comes to beg him to allow his son's corpse to be taken back to Troy for burial:

*“Revere the gods, Achilles! Pity me in my own right,  
remember your own father! I deserve more pity...  
I have endured what no one on earth has ever done before—  
I put to my lips the hands of the man who killed my son.”*

*Those words stirred within Achilles a deep desire  
to grieve for his own father. Taking the old man's hand  
he gently moved him back. And overpowered by memory  
both men gave way to grief. Priam wept freely  
for man-killing Hector, throbbing, crouching  
before Achilles' feet as Achilles wept himself,  
now for his father, now for Patroclus once again,  
and their sobbing rose and fell throughout the house.*

*(trans. Robert Fagles; Book 24, lines 588-599)*

Again we see Achilles as vulnerable: instead of giving in to rage or denying Priam his request, the hero is crushed by sympathy with his enemy and again by grief: grief for his lost friend Patroclus, grief for his father's death, grief for Priam, whose son he killed to avenge Patroclus. Humanity surfaces even in Achilles, the most violent man alive. It is this moment of recognition and identification with his enemy's grief that Achilles (despite being half god) can be seen as human; if it weren't for these displays of vulnerability it would be difficult to think of Achilles as anything but a raging bloodthirsty warrior who sulks in his warship while his friends and comrades die in battle not a mile away. Instead, we realize that like us he is vulnerable, flawed, sympathetic; we become willing and capable of weeping for him, the way he becomes able to weep for those both he and his enemies have lost.

In the "Winter Conversation" between Mark Halliday and Allen Grossman published in *The Sighted Singer*, Grossman says, "I am convinced that the greatest function of poetry... is the keeping of the image of persons as precious in the world... the most ancient poets are found making possible the recollection across time of the images of heroes (Grossman, 6)." When I first encountered these statements, they rang true to me; in the process of trying and failing repeatedly to write poems that explore my relationship with my father, Grossman's ideas felt closely related to the project that I couldn't figure out how to access. It struck me as accurate that the "principal outcome" of the poems I wanted to write was to keep the image of my father and my relationship with him in the world: not only in the sense that I wanted to write poems that

would help me remember him, but also that would help me understand him. The difficulty I encountered was in accurately and responsibly creating a representation of a person who I see as both fundamentally flawed and as a hero; a problem of balancing praise, remembrance, and critique without simplifying the complexities of his character.

In large part, this difficulty and frustration in the task of writing about my father lead me to a series of questions about the definition and nuances of the concept of a 'hero.' What does it actually mean to be a hero, and how can writers responsibly memorialize heroic persons when language, like other imitative modes of representation, inevitably falls short in preserving the literal image and emotions of what/who it seeks to represent? If, as Grossman asserts, Homer was "the principle of the recovery of the image of Achilles (Grossman, 7)," and contemporary poets "embark on the same task that Homer was working on," which he describes as making heroes "weepable" (a term he borrows from Horace's odes), how can a writer best go about successfully completing a project whose main goal is the preservation of the image of a person we identify as heroic? When our chosen mode of representation innately and inevitably results in objectification and omission of parts of the hero's person, how can we write about other people successfully and why should we use poetry to do it?

We can return to statements made by Grossman in *The Sighted Singer* to begin unpacking these questions: "Poetry is merely the provision of the sufficient conditions for an "I" and a "you" to come together in the common space provided by our art, and be with one another in discourse (Grossman, 84)." He also suggests that poetry is a type of discourse that suppresses

other voices and distractions; that poetry demands the attention of the reader in a way that other modes of discourse don't. For this reason, poetry is an ideal tool for the task of making real people acknowledgeable because it demands that the reader hear and consider seriously what is presented in the poem. If a poem is an artifact comprised of literary techniques aiming to make a person acknowledgeable, then the reader who encounters the poem must in turn acknowledge the person it represents.

Terrance Hayes' poem "How to be Drawn to Trouble" from his collection *How to be Drawn* has been tumbling around in my head since I read it over a year ago. Each time I return to it, I feel its emotions—its tragedy, its staggering grief, its love—more powerfully. The poem centers around the speaker's mother and the late James Brown, whose lives came into contact with one another briefly when James Brown was confined in the prison where the speaker's mother was a correctional officer. The poem is a triumphant example of how a person's—in this case, two people's—image and humanity can and should be kept in the world using poetry. It makes both of its character's sympathetic and multidimensional without ignoring their shortcomings. By the poem's close, the reader is able to weep not only for the speaker's mother and James Brown, but also for the speaker himself. The poem is able to temper its objectification with the emotional resonance it achieves through clear, direct language, apt and well timed abstract statements, and subtle rhetorical maneuvering.

I want to begin by drawing attention to the plain, almost prosaic language Hayes uses. The poem opens: "The people I live with are troubled by the way I have been playing / "Please, Please, Please," by James Brown and the Famous Flames / All evening...(1-3)" Read aloud, it sounds like speech, not song; most of the lyrical flourishes are more rhetorical in function than aesthetic. In addition, the poem is in large part narrative: it is couched in the frame-narrative of the speaker listening to music in his own dwelling, reflecting on and retelling the story of his mother and James Brown. This is all to say that the poem proceeds primarily through techniques that are not particularly lofty or lyrically heightened. This simplicity and directness of the language allows Hayes to very carefully guide the reader through the poem.

As the poem unfolds, the abstract moments are scaffolded in such a way that they do not come off as mysterious or veiled; they land with intentionality. In the line, "Trouble is how we learn what the soul is (18)," we are prepared to make concrete sense of it by the detailed accounts of literal trouble that precede it: both the description of the car chase that comes immediately before, and the description of how the speaker is "troubled" by the song "Please, Please Please," in the opening lines. In this way, the abstractions in the poem feel both relatable and particular to the specific experiences of the people in the poem.

One of the things that is so remarkable about the poem is the way that it continuously gives us hints about how to read it. Our entrance into the poem is the speaker stating that he's been listening to the same James Brown song repeatedly all evening, troubling the people he

lives with. Then, he moves to acknowledge and complicate the stereotypical image of James Brown:

*...James Brown is no longer a headwind of hot grease*

*And squealing for ladies with leopard-skinned intentions,*

*Stoned on horns and money. Once I only knew his feel-good music. (4-6)*

We're given the familiar image of the soul singer with his shining hair and his face sparkling with sweat, surrounded by drugs and adoring fans (which anyone remotely familiar with James Brown can picture perfectly), but the phrase "no longer" tells us that this image is only a part of who he was; that it isn't the whole picture. Then, the statement, "Once I only knew his feel-good music," reinforces this idea by suggesting that yes, the feel-good music for which James Brown is typically remembered is important and a part of his history, but there is depth and content that goes far beyond that small parcel of the singer's life and career. There's more to his story: a real, weepable person beneath the familiar myth. And sure enough, by the middle of the poem we move beyond the mythic image of the singer into ideas and details that make him feel more human:

*...For some reason, he had six or seven pairs*

*Of Italian leather beneath his bunk suggesting where he'd been,*

*Even if for the moment, he wasn't going anywhere.*

*Think about how little your feet would touch the ground*

*If you were on your knees pleading two or three times a day.*

*There are theories about freedom, and there is a song that says*

*None of us are free. (39-45)*

Hayes pushes the reader past a simple, stereotypical understanding of James Brown toward one that is more particular and nuanced, and also toward more universal abstract statements that are important to both our understanding of James Brown and to the reader's position in, and knowledge of, the world. We are asked to contemplate what it would be like to be "on your knees pleading two or three times a day," suggesting that this is precisely what James Brown does; this then prompts the reader to engage critically with the idea of pleading and how it relates to James Brown's life. Because the song by James Brown that the poem uses as a central metaphor is titled "Please, Please, Please," we immediately make the connection that one sort of pleading that we are meant to think of is in the performance of the song; but because of where this line is positioned in the poem, we know that it applies to the singer's life off of the stage as well. We can't know exactly what it is that James Brown pleads for, but we come to an understanding that there is trouble in his life that he and we can't fully comprehend or reconcile, much like the troubles that we might face in our own lives. In this way, the reader is able to identify with a figure that is so legendary and infamous that it feels at times that he was hardly human.

Complicating our understanding of James Brown is one of the poem's concerns, but it is not the central emotional project of the poem. More importantly, the historical figure is used to nuance the reader's understanding of the speaker's mother and his relationship with her. Because of the way the poem weaves its two narratives—that of James Brown and that of his mother's repeated disappearances and violent behavior—the things said about James Brown begin to relate and apply to the speaker's mother as well. By the end of the poem, their two experiences are even momentarily conflated:

*I can still hear all the love buried*

*Under all the noise she made. But sometimes I hear it wrong.*

*It's not James Brown making trouble, it's trouble he's drawn to... (48-50)*

The "it" in the second line is made to apply to both the mother's noise and to James Brown's voice; and the mishearing on the speaker's part tells us that there is complexity and difficulty beneath both. The poem's heartbreaking closure cements the tragedy and trouble shared by James Brown and the speaker's family in the reader's mind:

*Baby, you done me wrong. Took my love, and now you're gone.*

*It's trouble he's asking to stay. My father might have said Please*

*When my mother was beating the door and then calling to me*

*From the window. I might have heard her say Please just before  
Or just after the glass and then the skin along her wrist broke.  
Pleasepleasepleasepleaseplease, that's how James Brown says it.*

Please, please, please, please, please, Honey, please don't go. (51-57)

The poem brings us back to one of our main questions: what is a hero, and who can be a hero? Too often the types of people that are represented as heroes in American media fall in line with Thomas Carlyle's pre-fascist "Great Man Theory" which suggests that the world turns on the backs of great men (and won't be discussed in this essay). However, the typical reader of contemporary poetry is no longer interested in revering these types of people, nor those people with a proven capacity for extreme violence as the classics do. Our heroes are no longer "great" or "world-changing" the way Carlyle believed them to be. But, they do change *our* world. James Brown could probably fit into the framework of Carlyle's idea of the hero, but Terrance Hayes' mother couldn't. And yet, flaws and all, she is the true hero of the poem.

In her essay, "The *Iliad*, or the Poem of Force," Simone Weil writes:

*The true hero, the true subject, the center of the Iliad is force.  
Force employed by man, force that enslaves man, force before  
which man's flesh shrinks away. In this work, at all times, the  
human spirit is shown as modified by its relations with force, as*

*swept away, blinded by the very force it imagined it could handle,  
as deformed by the weight of the force it submits to... force, today  
as yesterday, [is] at the very center of human history, [and] the  
Iliad is the purest and the loveliest of mirrors. (Weil, 6)*

Weil's assertion that the hero of the *Iliad* is force lead me to the syllogistic fallacy that, though incorrect in the logician's handbook, is, I think, important to this discussion: if force can be a hero, then a hero can be a force. In my efforts to reach a universal definition for the word "hero," it seemed that no matter how I phrased it, there was a quality lurking beneath my definition that was eluding me. The people that each individual person choose to see as heroic are determined largely by cultural differences; they are relative based on our individual ideologies, experiences, beliefs. Thus, our working definition should have less to do with specific qualities of the person we are calling heroic and more to do with their relative importance to the person calling them a hero. My definition: a hero is a person who impacts us in a positive or generative way that stands out from other positive impacts. A hero is a *force* exerted on us that stands out in our lives, that we remember, that we elevate above other forces. The sunny weather today while I write this essay and the friendly barkeep that remembers my name have an impact on me, are forces exerted upon me, but they are not my heroes. The nurse who reversed my liver's shutdown when I was ten years old and none of my doctors knew what to do, thinking that most likely I was going to die of dehydration in my hospital bed with my parents seated helplessly beside me, *is* a hero. She was a force in my life that made it so that I could continue living.

In contemporary poetry, heroes are human forces that help us live. Despite their flaws and the pain they may potentially bring us in the process of having a positive impact on us, they ultimately inform what we believe it means to live right. This force can be powerful or gentle; exceptional (as more traditional definitions would have it) or not. It can come in the form of a parent's strong influence on every aspect of our lives; or, it could come in the form of mere artistic influence and admiration. In the Terrance Hayes poem, the speaker's mother is portrayed mostly through her flaws; in this sense, the depiction of her is problematic because of the way it reduces her: surely she wasn't always destructive and erratic—what else was she like? But, despite this reductive quality, we cannot help feel a tremendous love right beneath the surface of the text, a love that helps the speaker live his life every day. It is this love that elevates her to the status of a hero.

In Roger Reeves' poem "Self-Portrait as Ernestine 'Tiny' Davis," Reeves speaks from the perspective of the jazz trumpeter and singer, Ernestine Davis. Davis was known as the "Female Louis Armstrong;" she played in a racially integrated, all-woman band in the 1940s; she was openly gay and operated a gay club with her partner in a time when being gay or black were both essentially treated as crimes by the police. Despite her remarkable life, little is known about her compared to male musicians of similar prestige; her wikipedia page is shorter than Reeve's short poem about her. Davis's relative obscurity, dedication to equality, excellence in her art, and

bravery in the face of racism and homophobia are all factors that likely drove Reeves to write about her; in doing so, he brings a hero who is relatively obscure to the attention of people who probably wouldn't even know her name.

Reeves' decision to write in persona allows him to give someone who has practically been forgotten an audience and voice again. This is one of persona writing's most exciting and important functions, but it also comes with responsibilities. Before writing a persona poem, one must always ask themselves "Why am I speaking for this person?" If we do not have a satisfactory answer to this question, we risk doing violence to the memory of the person by making them speak in a way that is not in service to their memory and their humanity. If the only reason we are writing about someone is that their life is interesting, but we do not have something important to say that in some way honors or nuances our understanding of the person, we are merely exploiting the peculiarity of their life for our own gain. There *must* be a reason to write in persona that is not purely aesthetic. In the case of Reeves' poem, 'Tiny' Davis's voice is lifted from obscurity and empowered to push against sexism, racism, and size discrimination. Through the channel of Reeves' poetry, her voice joins contemporary conversations about equality.

In the first five lines of the poem alone, we are presented with a searing but sensitive voice that immediately begins to speak out against the oppression that weighed upon her and other women like her during her lifetime:

*Call me hippo. Call the woman beneath me  
 a broken boat, a thin white skiff, a toothpick  
 unhinging a speck of pepper from between  
 my gapped teeth. Call the curtains closed.  
 Call that tour bus to cover my breasts. (1-5)*

Quickly, a tone is established that is confident, a bit irreverent, and willing to speak against oppressive norms that existed in the 1940s and still exist today. In this sense, the poem serves as an extension and exploration of Davis's history and personhood, and also as a permanent art object that contributes to ongoing conversations about important social issues.

Unlike the Terrance Hayes poem, "Self-Portrait as Ernestine 'Tiny' Davis" is practically free of narrative, and instead builds energy and import using heightened lyricism: The rhetorical techniques that the poem employs—its hyperbole, its epistrophe (They sang only to be noticed. / I am noticing. They are noticed), its insistent anaphora ("Call me...", which also draws attention to the act of naming)—are all techniques of traditional lyric poetry. On top of this, there is perhaps not a single line in the poem that is without metaphorical implications; at no point are we inclined to take the images as literal because we never leave this mode of figurative, associative meaning-making. Because it does not seek to include "real" events, the poem seems to sidestep the issue of misrepresenting the literal, factual trajectory of Davis's life. It is pure voice, pure lyricism; nothing is literal, but that doesn't diminish its validity:

*I've found every sparrow God has forgotten  
to watch over. I've wreathed them in briars  
and hung them from the back fence. They say  
they're tired of singing. They sang only to be noticed.  
I am noticing. They are noticed... (18-22)*

In the metaphor, the sparrows track to those who have been forgotten or mistreated by society: people of color, women, non-binary people; groups who have had to fight to be acknowledged and respected. The crucifixion of the sparrows is a gesture toward these groups' redemption from oppression. In the final line, the speaker demands that those addressed in the poem—the people responsible for her oppression and the oppression of others—give her the title and the respect that she deserves: "Call me queen. King me."

In "Who Will Speak for this Flesh," a review of Reeve's collection *King Me* in which the poem appears, Laura Eve Engel aptly describes the relationship between Reeves and his speaker in this poem: "...it is through the presence of a more broadly shared, resonant figuring of appropriation and resilience that Reeves's speaker permits himself entry to the fluidity of the mode of self-portrait as well as to a portraiture of his own experience." The quote brings to mind the fact that, when we write about real people, the poet and the person become linked, and the writer benefits. Even though his poems do complicate the memories of the figures they represent, Reeves benefits in the same way that Homer did: the poet is remembered before and in conjunction with the people they write about.

In an interview with Switchback Magazine, Reeves responded to a question about the inspiration for another persona poem from the perspective of Anne Frank in *King Me*:

*I wanted to enter into a body that wasn't mine, and begin to think about persona. And the thing that no one thinks about in [Anne Frank's Diary] is Anne Frank's budding sexuality. But it's there. And that she didn't get to experience something she'd always wanted, to me, is the saddest thing in the world. But, it's something we never think about. Or at least I hadn't when I wrote that poem. One of the things I do—and I think it's extremely important—is to find queries into historical subjects that humanize them even more, and can then complicate how we think about them today.*

This is an elegant articulation of the project of persona writing, and "Thinking of Anne Frank in the Middle of Winter" is an exemplary poem in the form: it humanizes her; it complicates her. Compared to "Self-Portrait as Ernestine 'Tiny' Davis," the poem's language and maneuvers are relatively simple. The heavy reliance on metaphor is still present, but alongside it there is a clarity of voice, a desire to be heard and understood that addresses Reeves' concerns that Anne Frank's human qualities have been ignored by family-friendly, kitsch history; that a majority of people remember her for her death instead of her life.

*Peter, where is the checkered suit  
 you snagged against a stray nail  
 when we lay together  
 straighter than the attic boards  
 that warped beneath us.  
 How did we know this was not enough? (11-16)*

Here, plain language brings the beauty and tragedy of Frank's life to the attention of the reader: we see the familiar narrative of the teenage girl hiding from Nazis that want her dead, but we also see her emerging sexuality. The first question in the lines above suggests that Anne wants to see Peter dressed handsomely in his checkered suit, despite the violence and terror that rules their lives; she wants to live the way those who do not need to hide do. The last line above drives the idea home: it shows her refusal to resign herself to victimhood and her raw, human desire to experience sex and romantic love. For this reason, the tragedy of Anne Frank's death is made more real, more relatable; we are forced to acknowledge what it would be to be prevented from living a complete life. The poem closes with passion and tragedy:

*Your lips moving against the back of my neck  
 even as I pulled away. Peter,  
 I, too, love anything that reaches and fails. (20-22)*

Using the ideas of Grossman and Horace, we talked earlier about how contemporary poets set out on the same project that Homer did: to make heroes weepable; that is, to make it so that the reader is able to identify with and then empathize with the people who are immortalized in poetry that aims to create permanent artifacts that preserve the image of persons in the world. This is nuanced by Roger Reeves' idea that this type of writing should "find queries into historical subjects that humanize them even more, and can complicate how we think about them today." So: contemporary poetry that has heroification as an aim, or merely as a byproduct of the larger ambitions of the poem, must humanize and complicate the figure represented such that their lives, ideas, emotions can be brought into contemporary discourse in a meaningful way. Whether the figure is one that is well known (like James Brown) or one that is relatively obscure or known only to a particular subset of people—"Tiny" Davis or my father, respectively—poems that seem to represent real people should do so in a way that attempts to tell a universal truth about humanity; one that resonates with the particularity of experience as represented in a poem, *and* with our own lives and life in general. It is not a small task; often our poems fail to achieve it. But, in representing real people in writing, it is an ideal that we must work toward if we want to responsibly embark on the task of making people weepable. If we don't, we risk allowing the objectification and reduction that is innate in the use of language for representation to go without being balanced and tempered using other methods.

As we've seen, there isn't just one right way of going about this tempering. In Fagle's translation of the *Iliad*, we see heroification happening in almost exclusively narrative ways, and

the humanization that occurs toward the end of the poem for Achilles occurs because of the actions and speech of the characters. Metaphor and music are present in the poem, but the primary technique used to make Achilles weepable is to recount events in a linear fashion, arriving at last in scenes of grief that create sympathy in the reader. In Terrance Hayes' "How to be Drawn to Trouble," the heroification of James Brown and the speaker's mother is achieved in part through its woven narratives, but also through its simplicity of language, deft rhetorical structuring, and well-scaffolded abstraction; without these techniques, the humanization that occurs in the poem would not have the resonance that it does.

Moving further away from narrative modes, we saw ways that Roger Reeves uses heightened lyricism to embark on the task of responsible representation of heroic figures. In "Self-Portrait as Ernestine 'Tiny' Davis," Reeves makes use of a heightened voice, a pulsing anaphora, and a complex, shifting metaphorical landscape to give a powerful voice to, and thus humanizing, an important figure that history has all but forgotten. In doing so, not only are we made capable of weeping for Davis, we feel empowered to root for her; not only for her accomplishments as a musician, but for embracing her identity as a black lesbian in an America that rejected both qualities of her identity. In "Thinking of Anne Frank in the Middle of Winter," we saw similar techniques used—though in a simpler fashion—to take up and complicate the popular, incomplete narrative of a well known historical figure. Adopting the voice of Anne Frank using persona, Reeves makes her sympathetic for the "right" things by drawing attention to her more human qualities: her budding sexuality, her desire for a real, normal life, her burden of having to exist in a world that wants her dead.

Using the techniques outlined above and others, Tyehimba Jess's Pulitzer Prize winning second book, *Olio*, makes a cast of black musicians and performers living during and after the Civil War acknowledgeable; of bringing to the world's attention the lives of heroes whose memories have practically faded from America's collective memory due to the white desire to forget the travesties committed against black people over the course of our young country's history. The book is perhaps the most effective and thorough example of a contemporary, full-length work that succeeds in keeping the images of people in the world. Of particular interest are Jess's approach to structure, his use of multiple voices, and ingenuity with form to encourage engagement from his reader to make the figures represented in the book feel real.

Before arriving at the first poem in the book, Jess presents the reader with the cast of important performers written about in the book: the "owners of this olio (Jess, 1)." The entries in the cast list include each performer's years of birth and death and a short, lyrical description of their life:

*"Blind" Tom Wiggins (1849-1908) - Tom was autistic slave savant, possessing formidable piano skills. Under the lifelong "management" of his masters, the Bethunes, Wiggins played \$1 million worth of tunes. He's family inheritance,*

*bound from father to son to wife, until his Final Freedom on the other side...*

*(Jess, 2)*

Presenting the names of the musicians and a little bit about their lives is a small but important gesture: it is the first step in making these people feel real. It pushes back against the inclination for the reader to think of the people as symbolic or as tokens; it reminds us that these people who have been all but forgotten aren't just a handful of black musicians from around 1900. They are real, individual people with real experiences and emotions that the book will engage with to honor and broaden our understanding of them.

The introduction above is for the central figure of the book's first section in the book: a sonnet sequence that focuses on the life of pianist "Blind" Tom Wiggins, an autistic man who was born blind to a mother that was a slave of the Bethune family. Despite his blindness, Tom was allowed to live (the Bethunes considered killing him because he could not work and was of no economic value to them). He developed into a prodigious piano player, writing his first original composition at the age of five. For most of his life, the Bethunes sent Tom on tours during which he was overworked, often performing as many as four times a day. Tom earned the Bethunes a considerable fortune, and was the highest compensated pianist of the nineteenth century, though the Bethunes stole most of his earnings for themselves. Even though other slaves had been freed when Tom was a teenager, he remained a slave of the Bethunes until his death at the age of 59.

"Blind" Tom's sequence consists of fourteen sonnets, most of which use creative variations on the form in order to include multiple speakers and different ways of moving through the text. For instance, the second sonnet in the sequence, "General James Bethune and John Bethune Introduce Blind Tom," every other line is split by a cesura. On each side of the cesura is a complete line that can be read on its own (ignoring the other half), or the two lines can both be read. The poem begins:

*Here he is, the Amazing Blind Tom...*

*he's pitched in darkness, exalted through sound      he's mastered sharp and flat of piano:*

*a slave whose head is a trunk full of song*

*peeling from each deft fingertip. We've found      a musical freak, a brown tornado,*

*a maestro who conjures three tunes at once—*

*(Jess, 16, lines 1-5)*

The form offers at least three different readings, and encourages the reader to experiment with the different ways the poem can unfold. This type of reader involvement amplifies the amount of attention that the reader is willing to give to the work; instead of passively running our eyes over the lines, the form itself demands attention. It gives the reader the opportunity to play and to challenge themselves within the body of the text. This heightened level of involvement is especially valuable when we consider the possibility that poetry is already a form of discourse that demands more attention than others, as Grossman asserts.

Moving backwards a bit, the sequence opens with the poem, "Blind Tom Plays for Confederate Troops, 1863." The date in the title is of particular import because it signals to us that the sequence begins with Tom still in slavery after the ordinance of the emancipation proclamation. The poem immediately introduces themes of servitude, abuse, virtuosity, and racism in no uncertain terms:

*The slave's hands dance free, unfettered, flying  
across ivory, feet stomping toward  
a crescendo that fills the forest pine,  
reminding the Rebs what they're fighting for—  
black, captive labor. (Jess, 15, lines 1-5)*

The poem proceeds by giving us the image of Tom playing the piano facing away from it, bent over with his arms behind his back, "[leaning] like a runner about the throw / himself to freedom through forest bramble." This initial image of Tom shows him as both remarkably talented, but still obligated to literally bend over to appease his audience and owners. He is an exploited virtuoso whose will and agency have been robbed of him; a man that has been made into a spectacle.

These aspects of Tom's life make him an ideal candidate for the poetic project of preserving the image of a person in the world and making him acknowledgeable; in *Olio*, Jess refuses to accept the damaging idea of Tom as just another objectified minstrel performer. He

makes Tom particular by giving him and the people around him voices that develop and nuance our understanding of his incredible history. A variety of different voices are employed to explore the complexities of Tom's life: an omniscient speaker that compares him to an elemental force; a number of voices in persona of those around Tom including his owners, his mother, and others; and, most importantly, the voice of Tom himself.

The fourth poem, "Mark Twain v. Blind Tom," is perhaps the most astonishingly successful piece in the sequence. The poem is split into two columns that can be read separately or in tandem. The right column is the voice of Tom; the left consists of an extended quotation pulled from a letter written on August 1, 1869 by Mark Twain to the San Francisco *Alta California*. The bulk of the letter, which is not quoted in the poem, consists of Twain describing an encounter he had with Tom in which Tom was imitating various sounds and contorting his body into unusual positions. Twain describes him repeatedly as an idiot, a clod, and a savage, and closes the letter with the statement, "It is not "Blind" Tom that does these wonderful things and plays this wonderful music—it is the other party." A conclusion he arrives at based on his observations of Tom in the act of imitation. At no point in the letter does Twain suggest that Tom's talent is his own, that he is a virtuoso, or that he has any value beyond the entertainment he provides to white audiences. The letter reeks of racism and objectification, which Jess responds to by using Tom's voice to reclaim and alter the demeaning language used by Twain in order to empower Tom:

Some archangel,

*I'm sent from above—*

cast out of upper heaven                      *like rain on blue prayers*  
 like another Satan,                              *blessed with Gabriel's notes, I*  
 inhabits this coarse casket;                      *can see up to God's throne, yes*

*(Jess, 18, lines 1-4)*

The poem is extremely important to the sequence and the book as a whole because it functions in a way that the other sonnets don't: it includes and responds to the real, written words of an important white historical figure unabashedly flaunting his bigotry. The other poems are also based on thorough research, but the words that we are given are written by Jess, not the historical figures themselves. "Mark Twain v. Blind Tom" does the important work of proving to the reader that the experiences of black people and the views of white people expressed in *Olio* are not being exaggerated; that there are staggering wrongs that must be reconciled and that, in some way, reparations must be made for the treatment of black people in America.

As the sequence progresses, we are pushed to grapple with Tom's suffering, his virtuosity, his unique beauty. He is made sympathetic, complex, and acknowledgeable by the employment of a wide range of voices and forms. In the fourteenth and final poem, in which Tom speaks for himself after passing away, the project of restoring Tom's humanity is brought to a triumphant close:

*I'm nowhere at all, but sing everywhere—                      I dance inside each holla and whole note—*

*Let me introduce to those who ain't heard me:*

*Here I am, Blind Tom: Piano man. Free.*

*(Jess, 28, lines 12-14)*

Terrance Hayes, Roger Reeves, and Tyehimba Jess are all contemporary poets whose work demonstrates different approaches to successfully engaging in the project of heroification, and can serve as examples for how we might approach these types of challenging but meaningful projects in our own writing. There are risks when it comes to writing in this mode—the possibility of reduction and simplification of a person's humanity, the risk of sensationalizing a person's life exclusively to benefit of our own art—but when done effectively, our heroes can be made weepable, human, important; they can join contemporary discourse in a way that benefits and complicates their memory and extends emotional resonances across time.

## How to be Drawn to Trouble

*Terrance Hayes*

The people I live with are troubled by the way I have been playing  
 "Please, Please, Please," by James Brown and the Famous Flames  
 All evening, but they won't say. I've got a lot of my mother's music  
 In me. James Brown is no longer a headwind of hot grease

And squealing for ladies with leopard-skinned intentions,  
 Stoned on horns and money. Once I only knew his feel good music.

While my mother watched convicts dream, I was in my bedroom  
 Pretending to be his echo. I still love the way he says *Please*  
 Ten times straight, bending the one syllable until it sounds  
 Like three. Trouble is one of the ways we discover the complexities

Of the soul. Once, my mother bit the wrist of a traffic cop  
 But was not locked away because like him, she was an officer

Of the state. She was a guard at the prison in which James Brown  
 Was briefly imprisoned. There had been broken man-made laws,  
 A car chase melee, a roadblock of troopers in sunblock.  
 I, for one, don't trust the police because they go around looking

To eradicate trouble. *T-R-oh-you-better-believe*  
*In trouble.* Trouble is how we learn what the soul is.

James Brown, that brother could spice up any sentence he uttered  
 Or was given. His accent made it sound like he was pleading  
 Whether he was speaking or singing. A woman can make a man  
 Sing. After another of my mother's disappearances, my father left her

Bags on the porch. My father believes a man should never dance  
 In public. Under no circumstances should a grown man have hair

Long enough to braid. If I was a black girl, I'd always be mad.  
 I might weep too and break. But think about the good things.  
 My mother and I love James Brown in a cape and sweat  
 Like glitter that glows like little bits of gold. In the photo she took

With him, he holds her wrist oddly, probably unintentionally  
 Covering her scar. There's the trouble of being misunderstood

And the trouble of being soul brother number one sold brother  
 Godfather dynamite. Add to that the trouble of shouting  
 "I got to get out!" "I got to get down!" "I got to get on up the road!"  
 For many years there was a dancing competition between

My mother and father though rarely did they actually dance.  
 They did not scuffle like drums or cymbals, but like something

Sluggish and close to earth. You know how things work  
 When they don't work? I want to think about the good things.  
 The day after the Godfather of Soul finished signing just that  
 All over everything in the prison, all my mother wanted to talk

About were his shoes. For some reason, he had six or seven pairs  
 Of Italian leather beneath his bunk suggesting where he'd been,

Even if for the moment, he wasn't going anywhere.  
 Think about how little your feet would touch the ground  
 If you were on your knees pleading two or three times a day.  
 There are theories about freedom, and there is a song that says

None of us are free. My mother had gone out Saturday night,  
 And came home Sunday an hour or so before church.

She punched clean through the porch window  
 When we wouldn't let her in. I can still hear all the love buried  
 Under all the noise she made. But sometimes I hear it wrong.  
 It's not James Brown making trouble, it's trouble he's drawn to:

*Baby you done me wrong. Took my love, and now you're gone.*  
 It's trouble he's asking to stay. My father might have said *Please*

When my mother was beating the door and then calling to me  
 From the window. I might have heard her say *Please* just before  
 Or just after the glass and then the skin along her wrist broke.  
*Pleasepleasepleasepleaseplease*, that's how James Brown says it.

*Please, please, please, please, please, Honey, please don't go.*

**Self-Portrait as Ernestine "Tiny" Davis***Roger Reeves*

Call me hippo. Call the woman beneath me  
a broken boat, a thin white skiff, a toothpick  
unhinging a speck of pepper from between  
my gapped teeth. Call the curtains closed.  
Call that tour bus to cover my breasts.  
Once, a man scraped me jagged as a pinecone.  
I scraped him white as a star, then left him  
and his head in a trough beside a pen of pigs.  
Call the trough home. Call Daddy out  
of this wet house. I can't sing without hearing a man  
slipping below water clean as butter, clean  
as a roach sliding down the thin throat of a crow.  
Call the road from Chicago to Memphis brief  
encounters with an ax and a woman  
who carries dust in her mouth. Call Jesus  
down from that cross. Call my tongue a crown  
of thorns, a patch of nettles sunk deep in an arm.  
I've found every sparrow God has forgotten  
to watch over. I've wreathed them in briars  
and hung them from the back fence. They say  
they're tired of singing. They sand only to be noticed.  
I am noticing. They are noticed. Funny little beasts  
often mistaken for something that should be pierced,  
a spine broken on a thorn, then eaten—breast first.  
Call me tiny, anything small: an acorn  
lodged in the throat of a thrush. Choke. A claw  
squeezed from the purple head of a flower. Prick.  
A hunk of pork butt plucked from the gums  
and placed back onto the tongue. Gag. Then swallow.  
Feed me. Call my appetite a kind of kingdom.  
Call me Queen. King me.

### Thinking of Anne Frank in the Middle of Winter

There's a boy whose face I've touched,  
once, like these blackbirds peck  
and lick at frozen cat food sitting outside my door  
in pie tins that clatter against anything  
that will touch them. Eventually,  
they will drag their tinny bottoms  
across the driveway's cement  
until they rest against a spigot's dry mouth  
as if to say *Whatever the price, I'll pay*.  
A bruise. A sheaf of paper. An attic.  
Peter, where is the checkered suit  
you snagged against a stray nail  
when we lay together  
straighter than the attic boards  
that warped beneath us.  
How did we know this was not enough?  
A boot. A creak. A cloud of dust  
rising from a blanket  
that covered our shattering cheeks.  
Your lips moving against the back of my neck  
even as I pulled away. Peter,  
I, too, love anything that reaches and fails.

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