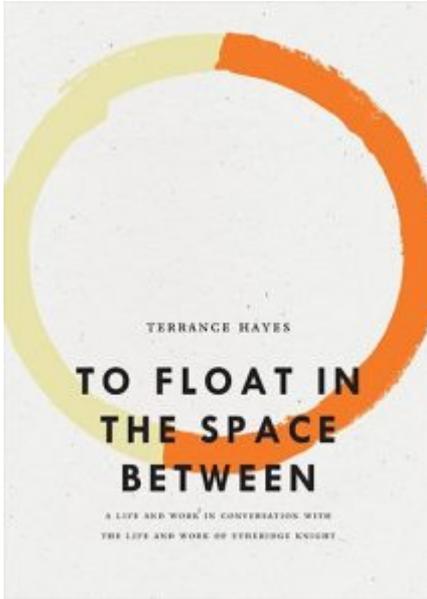


Life Work: Terrance Hayes on Etheridge Knight

written by Patrick James Dunagan | October 2, 2018



To Float in the Space Between: A Life and Work in Conversation with the Life and Work of Etheridge Knight by Terrance Hayes

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Poets should write books about other poets. There's an intimacy comes of hearing about what attracts one poet to the work of another that is endlessly engrossing. Even if the attraction is just the fact of being simply drawn towards reading what one would like to write. It's nothing less than fascinating to follow along as the connections are clearly laid out. What lessons were derived from looking at what the other poet accomplished (or failed to accomplish) and how that in turn informs the development of the author's own work. Ideally, the exchange is reciprocal after a fashion as the original poet's work gains a new focus of attention being brought to it by the second poet's commenting upon it, and that in turn hopefully draws readers further in fueling interest in the work of both poets. It also never hurts if in the exploration of the other poet the author divulges some details regarding their own work.

It is in just such fashion Terrance Hayes delivers the goods on Etheridge Knight. Hayes has no qualms acknowledging he approaches the project as a poet, *not* a scholar. As he remarks:

The distinction between a *scholar* on the trail of a poet and a poet on the trail of a *poet* is an important one. The scholar looks upon his subject as if through a window. The scholar aims to frame the

poet's work according to things like genre, talent, culture, history. A clear pane of logic, interpretation, and appreciation separates him from his subject. Conversely, a poet looking upon the poetry of another poet not only through a window but also through a mirror.

As Hayes's subtitle announces, his book is the story of "a life and work in conversation with the life and work of Etheridge Knight." That is to say *To Float in the Space Between* does just that. Hayes juggles a narrative that develops along two corresponding threads as it moves back and forth between telling a story about Knight and telling one about himself. That the two threads are rather entwined is expected, for as announced "this text is about influence." The story Hayes reveals about Knight is built upon navigating a path through the impact Knight's work has had upon Hayes himself.

Launching off of Knight's poem "The Idea of Ancestry" Hayes uses phrases from individual lines of the poem for each of his chapter headings. Structuring his book around folding, unfolding, and enfolding biographical contents found in this particular poem of Knight's, as well as others, those both factual as well as those not so much, with elements of his own life story. From the outset in writing about Knight, Hayes felt he "had two choices: a rigorously researched biography or a rigorously imagined biography." What he achieves falls somewhere in between and is sustained throughout by way of autobiography.

Hayes reflects on how his hesitancy over diving into the absolutely immersive task of attempting a full biography of Knight "almost suggests the *idea* of a biography is better than an actual biography." This is in fact much closer to the truth of the book he has turned out. It is a sort of interconnected set of ruminations over what makes up a biography and a would-be biographer. Knight clearly serves as a poetic father figure for Hayes and he's forced to find himself in that story. Along the way he includes tales of his associating with another would-be poetic father figure, Yusef Komunyakaa, and also includes details of the path he follows to finding his actual birth father. All of this fittingly comes alongside his reading into Knight's work and life. There's arguably more detailed insight into Hayes provided here than there is that of Knight. This isn't altogether a bad thing, either.

From the endearing unabashed personal admission:

My standards are not at all that high when it comes to longing. Another time as I sat in a Boston bar with a handful of writers, the subject of Flannery O'Connor's beauty, or to be more specific, lack of beauty, arose. Four-eyed, homely, sickly—these were the words being death before I admitted, I'd never really *measured* O'Connor's beauty. I hadn't compared her to some abstract idea of beauty. Why would I have thought of anyone but Flannery O'Connor while looking at Flannery O'Connor? She couldn't be unattractive if she was compared to herself. She was neither ugly nor beautiful to me. I stopped short of telling anyone that,

as a boy, I'd had something of a crush on her.

To recollecting first-hand witnessing bristling tension between two well-known writers over the handling of the legacy of Langston Hughes:

When I was invited to participate in the Langston Hughes centennial celebration a little later, I was more excited to hang with Radi than I was to meet Amiri Baraka and Arnold Rampersad. There was a panel during which there may have been talk of Hughes's possible homosexuality and talk of how white and light-skinned critics (see Arnold Rampersad) had diluted Hughes. Rampersad sat rolling his eyes slightly and sighing under his breath when Baraka spoke. Baraka reciprocated with slightly more visible disagreement when Rampersad spoke.

Hayes proves a generous and agreeably easy-going guide to an entertaining journey of what turns out to be, at least in part, his attempt to sort out the business of becoming a poet. (There is of course never any fully sorting that out. It's an ongoing business.)

There are occasional dips where Hayes's commentary loses sight of itself, such as the rather watered down theory of "Liquid Poetics" where Hayes states that "Robert Lowell crossed the borders of various poetics and liquid poetic networks—the Confessionals, the Beats, the New Critics. He was a liquid poet adapting and borrowing." If "adapting and borrowing" make a poet "liquid," what poet isn't? What sort of a poet doesn't adapt and borrow in order to make a poem that's altogether different and surprising from what's come before? Aside from that bit of quibbling, there's the fact that historically speaking, Lowell was indeed a product of the "Fugitive Movement" in literature from out of the "New South" a direct literary descendant of the likes of John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate.

This did lead to Lowell being one of the chief poster boys for the New Critics all of whom (Jarrell, Berryman, etc.) happened to rebel by "going confessional" at least to some degree (or what might be better said as making their own way in poetry). In other words, there's clear progression in Lowell's development as a poet that he shared with others of his generation. He wasn't just mixing and matching various styles. Also dabbling in some cross-talk, nothing more, with a couple of "the Beats" (along with ending up in-and-out of insane asylums, participating in anti-Vietnam marches, and partially eschewing metrical-based poetics) does not per se make one "Beat." Lowell doesn't benefit from such short-handed accounting any more than those readers too young or ill-read to know the difference do.

In the end, perhaps the most memorable portraits of Knight that Hayes turns up are provided by older poets who knew Knight personally. This doesn't detract anything from the accomplishment of Hayes's work either. Mary Karr cuts to the heart of Knight's poetic persona while conveying the beauty of any poet's necessary care for the lore of the poetic tradition itself:

He taught me about Gwendolyn Brooks. He showed me how to read Keats. He had this enormous knowledge of poetry from being in the joint. He loved Yeats. He quoted a lot of Yeats. He spent a lot of time professing and testifying. We would read everybody's poems, drink wine. I remember him being very generous with everybody ... You can't be a junkie that long and not know how to scam and know how to bob and weave and know how to duck your head and *aww shucks* and drag your toe and say, *I'm so sorry*. He had that blight of somebody who's been in the joint, who feels bad about himself. He had a great love of poetry as this grand Oz-like place, but he was kind of committed to go to [poetry] with his hat in his hand. In some ways he was a con about it. In some ways he knew it was a con.

Karr's honesty is rather harsh. But common to what Hayes has found when it comes to Knight: "Sometimes when I've asked people for stories about Etheridge Knight, I will hear only that he was a junkie. Even the stories of his commitment to poetry feature him asking to borrow money." The important thing is that Hayes understands that is all perfectly okay. The poetry perseveres.

There are no heroes to be found here but there are plenty of poets. There's also an abundance of evidence regarding what makes a poet a poet. Not surprisingly the best instances transcend far beyond anything possibly offered in a classroom setting. Hayes has written a book in its best parts about the larger realm of living—what goes on outside the MFA curriculum—and, for the most part, he does so with the self-scrutiny necessary to bring those lessons to bear on his own work. For there is no work without the life which both informs and is informed by it.