

Nathaniel Tarn's *The Embattled Lyric*: A Reader's Response

As writers, regardless of genre, we ultimately have choices to make as we confront the blankness of the page. Questions present themselves to us as we begin our investigation of a given subject—questions regarding tone, structure, content, and importantly, though not infrequently bypassed, intent. And here in my attempt to speak about Nathaniel Tarn's unordinary book of essays *The Embattled Lyric* I have been called upon to make a few choices of my own. This will not and is not meant to be a *conventional* review—and in truth, given the book at the center of this essay, I'm not certain, even if I wished to, that I could conduct such a standard academic analysis. Tarn says this of a work he is examining, "I apprehend, if only dimly, the immeasurable importance of *Religion and Nothingness* but I despair of ever beginning to do it justice." I have felt something similar though perhaps not quite despair, but a sense and even conviction that *The Embattled Lyric* is not a text one sums up easily, if at all. A publisher's back cover summary frankly could never be sufficient, not for this book—a book uncommonly crafted by an author whose life as poet and anthropologist and perhaps most of all, as thinker, has been from all appearances uncommonly lived. I have taken a few cues from the author himself:

"Sooner or later somebody like you comes along and says, "What I'm seeing is x, y, and z." And you say, "Absolutely! I hadn't thought of that." That seems to me the function of the real critic. Let's face it: nine-tenths of criticism is for the birds. It's also a "piece."

"The fact that the reader is part of the process, *that* applies in real criticism also."

So this "Reader's Response" may in fact be my way of saying *what I am seeing is x, y, and z* instead of declaring *this is x, y, and z* or *he means x, y, and z*. As to the second quote, certainly the reader by virtue of reading is

always part of the process, but I see Tarn's essays as necessitating not only the reader's participation but a close and sustained attention.

So exactly what is Tarn writing of? According to the back cover summary we are primed to learn of the following: "(1) the attitudes of selected poets (Neruda, Rilke, Breton, Celan, Artaud, Huidobro, Leiris, Paz, etc.) to the "primitive" and the "archaic," looked at from an anthropologist's viewpoint; (2) a model of the processes whereby poetry is produced and received built on Tarn's being in the very rare situation of having full careers as both poet and anthropologist." While I agree that he does address such items—I believe there is something greater being passed on to the reader, something beyond his views on various poets and their relationship to anthropological method and study, something more than his models and diagrams describing the construction of poetry. Certainly, these ideas, and well-wrought theories merit our attention—absolutely. But so does what Tarn is offering on another plane, perhaps a less specific, more general, or even philosophical one. Transcending the specificity of his model of poetry-making, his take on the overlap between the methodology of anthropology and poetry, his own gravitation to and practice of ethnopoetics—there is something else altogether. But what? Therein lies at once the beauty and perhaps the difficulty of the book—the reader is called upon to find their own way through Tarn's indubitably complex, formidable, and incessantly turning mind.

Given that it is not feasible, or even prudent here to try and sift through all eighteen essays written over the course of decades, there are phrases and sections from essays throughout that I found particularly salient and that I returned to several times, beginning with his first essay titled *Toward Any Geography/Toward Any America Whatsoever*, accompanied by this telling quote by Richard Grossinger:

"America has not been discovered: America will have no peace until it is discovered."

This essay sets the tone for the rest of the book, alerting the reader from the outset that you are not dealing with an ordinary, run-of-the-mill thinker, but instead with someone possessing a unique mind and approach to the world. Someone who is perhaps not quite content with the state of things as they are now,

or have been for some time, and has been and still is looking *toward* a new and different place. In this first piece written almost in the style of a prose poem, Tarn reveals pieces of his life—and one would certainly be remiss to ignore Tarn’s biography, details of which find their way into his book throughout. Hard not to recognize the significance of a man having lived on different continents and also having rigorously pursued two different fields of work and study. In his second essay, he so cleverly and fittingly describes himself as both a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde—Dr. Jekyll as poet, Mr. Hyde as anthropologist.

“Now you cannot move around like Mr. Hyde without a modicum of permanent culture shock. Which is why, no doubt, Dr. Jekyll had invaded Mr. Hyde in the first place, all those years ago.”

Certainly, whenever seeing Nathaniel Tarn’s name, one sees the two words, “poet”, and “anthropologist”—but in my estimation, not only is he and has he been these things, he is also part-psychologist, part-theorist, part-linguist, and the list goes on. With a thirty-year career as an anthropologist, and as a poet with a body of work including thirty-five books—it seems he has taken all of his various selves with him in all of his academic and literary endeavors. Challenging the very systems in which he takes part, and is part of—questioning the methods of anthropological study, and the construction of poetry. He is very concerned by voice, and what he calls *Chorus*, expressing a longing for a poetic voice that is “A helpful, in-forming voice, eager to reach and accept the other’s voice.” He raises questions like: What is the “primitive”? The other”? Is it ethnography or autobiography? Is it poetry or just an opportunity to exercise one’s ego? Do the lines serve a purpose?

In 2002 his *Selected Poems 1950-2000* was published by Wesleyan University Press, a book about which poet Brenda Hillman wrote a remarkable review titled “Steady Turbulence.” Hillman writes:

“This poetry redefines nature and art for human culture, bringing a genuine psychological and linguistic curiosity about the human mind, about what it means to be human.”

The title of his collection, *The Embattled Lyric*, certainly tips off the reader, that he is concerned about the state of poetry in this country, and everywhere. Tarn is highly preoccupied by questions regarding *who* is classifying *what*, *who* is observing *whom*, and of course *who* is writing *what*, and *why*—to what end? Sound simple? I might suggest that neither the problems he presents nor the solutions he offers are characterized by simplicity or even plausibility. In the illuminating interview at the book’s end, he calls for the following:

“The end of anthropology *and* the end of the academy in its present form. Although, for many guessable reasons, I’m ambivalent or multivalent about this.”

Tarn is someone with a very real concern for and vested interest in the future of poetry, and not necessarily having much to do with whether or not it is a particular kind of verse, written in a particular kind of style, with or without rhyme or classical structure—but instead that it is a poetry that brings forth something of use to the world. What would such a poem be, such a body of work be? Perhaps that verse might serve a function that it hasn’t been serving—to educate, to include what may be routinely dismissed and overlooked, to speak about what is of the greatest importance. Hillman comments and quite accurately so:

“Tarn offers a complicated, recombinant uneasy wisdom, the unbearable ‘maybe’ of the world. Wisdom is a process, not a thing.”

I hope that my failure to either outline or delineate his theories and models for the writing of poetry does not at all imply that they are not worth investigating. Quite the opposite—but for this particular reader, I found myself consumed by questions along the lines of: *What is it that I am writing? Why is it that I am writing it? Who am I writing it for? And yes, even—who am I, a poet? What is a poet? What is American poetry? Is there such a thing?*

Any book that can push a person to ask such things, and not only ask but purposefully examine, is a book worth opening. And frankly, perhaps if self-examination was a more prevalent activity amongst poets and scholars across the board, we might very well be on our way to constructing and inhabiting a new place—*toward any geography/ toward any America whatsoever.*

“It might get started like that. Anyday, it could begin like that. Anyday, it could begin.”